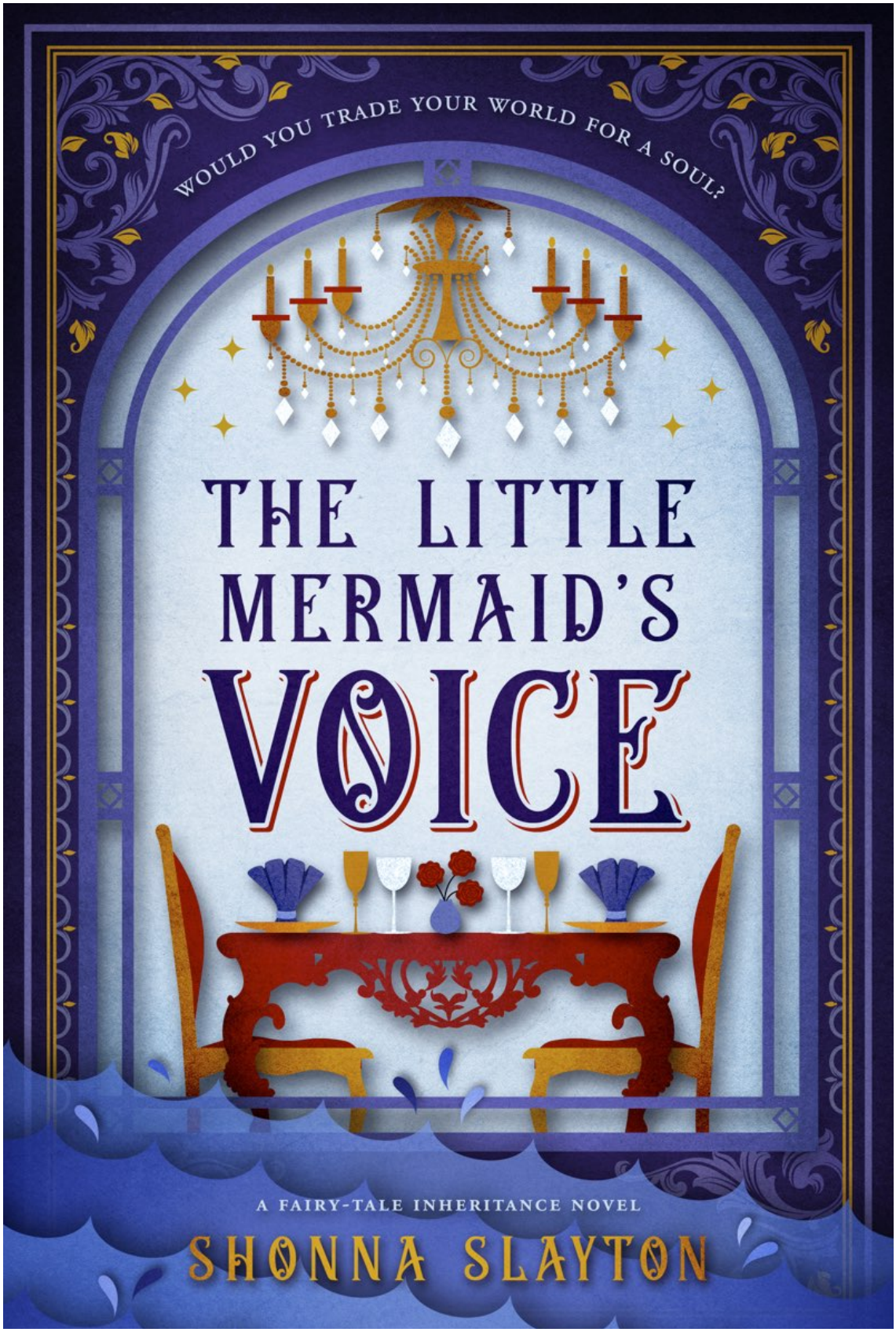
The Little Mermaid's Voice

Shonna Slayton


WOULD YOU TRADE YOUR WORLD FOR A SOUL?
THE LITTLE MERMAID'S VOICE
A FAIRY-TALE INHERITANCE NOVEL
SHONNA SLAYTON

THE LITTLE MERMAID’S VOICE

SHONNA SLAYTON

This book is a work of fiction. Characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2021 by Shonna Slayton.

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce, distribute, or transmit in any form or by any means.

For information regarding subsidiary rights, please contact the author at www.ShonnaSlayton.com Cover design by Jenny Zemanek.

Ebook ISBN: 978-1-947736-11-5

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-947736-12-2

ALSO BY SHONNA SLAYTON

Fairy-tale Inheritance Series

Cinderella's Dress

Cinderella's Shoes

Cinderella's Legacy (novella)

Snow White's Mirror

Beauty's Rose

Sleeping Beauty's Spindle

The Little Mermaid's Voice

Lost Fairy Tales

The Tower Princess

Historical Women

Liz and Nellie: Nellie Bly and Elizabeth Bisland's Race Around the World in Eighty Days

Lessons From Grimm

Lessons From Grimm: How to Write a Fairy Tale (Writer's Guide)

Lessons From Grimm: How to Write a Fairy Tale Workbooks Series

Writing Prompts From Grimm (grades 3-6 and 7-12)

CONTENTS

Foreword

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Author Note

Acknowledgments

Also by Shonna Slayton

To Abigail

FOREWORD

The Little Mermaid's Voice is based on two well-known narratives.

First, *The Little Mermaid* by Hans Christian Andersen. This fairy tale has evolved over the years, making the story more romantic and giving it a different ending. If you have only seen movies about the little mermaid, you might be surprised by the original story…and therefore the story being told here.

Second, the history of *Titanic* has also been told many times over. It was a challenge to separate myth from fact, and I hope this story makes you curious about the ship and its passengers. Much of what is written here is truly historical, but remember that this book is a book of fiction. I found no conclusive proof of a mermaid sailing on *Titanic.*

Enjoy.

PROLOGUE

A s the sun dipped below the horizon, the little mermaid’s hopes dropped with it into the sea. The long day was almost over, but she couldn’t look away.

It was all so beautiful. Large vases filled with white gladiolas blushed pink from the fading light. Tall pillar candles flickered along the path going up the bank where the final guests retired to their carriages. After the string quartet packed their instruments and drove away, the seaside became still and quiet with only the sound of water lapping against the rocks.

In the distance, a single carriage returned, having toured around town and circled back. The couple exited, and then the driver continued on to the stables, leaving them to walk hand in hand in the sunset.

The little mermaid held her breath, focused on seeing the prince one last time. Even now, she was ashamed to admit her need was so strong.

For too long, she’d seen only him and what he could give her, losing sight of herself. Of her people. And now it was too late.

She wished she was keeping vigil alone, but her older sister wouldn’t leave. “You don’t have to watch,” the little mermaid said, “but I need to see for myself.” Her voice cracked, along with her heart. She didn’t know if it was better or worse that her sister came for her. Ever the dutiful princess, her sister would make a wise queen one day.

The little mermaid gripped the rocky outcrop near the seashore until the edges bit into her hands. The pain reminded her of the way legs used to feel, all those sharp cuts with each step.

“You know the sea witch is a liar,” said her sister. “She could never make you a human with a soul. She only wanted your voice. And see? Your tail came back.” Her voice turned bitter. “None of us should have gone to her.”

The little mermaid risked a glance away. Her sister's recently shorn head was evidence of how far her family had gone to save her. All her sisters had sacrificed their flowing pride, their hair, for her. *Guilt piled upon guilt.*

She looked back at the scene on the deserted beach. The two forms became one shadow in the waning light, and she steeled herself.

She didn't ask to be rescued. Older sisters were always so controlling.

And now her father had arranged for her tail to return so she could leave this world as a daughter of the sea. She couldn't tell her sister what else their father had agreed to. That would come later.

"It's almost over. Leave me alone."

Her sister laughed bitterly. "Alone? None of us will have any freedom now, thanks to you." Her gaze shifted to the unused knife balanced on the rock between them. "I'm sorry. Come home and spend your last moments with your family. Since you didn't use the knife to save yourself, give us that."

The little mermaid frowned. She hadn't intended to cause trouble for everyone. Her grandmother had told her that if a human fell in love with her, he would share his soul, and she could live forever like them. She had wanted a soul so badly she ignored her inner voice that told her it wasn't logical. Blinded by the prince's handsome features, she'd barreled through everyone else's warnings and made a fool's deal. The sea witch had been all too happy to go along.

Now, the little mermaid was going to pay for it. Her sister didn't know how serious the bargain was or the risk she was about to take to break it.

Didn't matter. Once her sister found out—once the sea witch found out—it would be too late anyway.

"I'm giving you a gift," the little mermaid said. "All of you. But first, promise that for the next three hundred years my family, all of you, will help me watch out for him."

“Humans don’t live that long. Be glad you didn’t become one.”

Their souls live forever.

“Then his family. Please. It’s important to me, so I don’t become bitter as well as heartbroken.”

Her sister rolled back over before she reached out and touched her arm.

“Fine. We’ll help you watch over your precious prince and whatever that union produces. How hard could it be? Since you rescued him from drowning, he hasn’t gone near the water.”

“Thank you.” Her voice faded as the payment came due. She focused her remaining energy, gathered all her memories of life on land, and released them.

“What’s happening to you?” The older sister reached for the little mermaid, but her hands went right through her. “Sister! Where are you going? You’re turning to sea foam. Come back! Come back!”

Have my voice…

CHAPTER 1

M airin swam through the grand arch of her palatial home, brushing her fingers over the large staghorn coral at the top.

She kept her movements slow and methodical so she wouldn't attract the attention of the nearby triton guard.

From years of practice, she'd learned to control her powerful tail when sneaking out of the undersea palace. The same tail that marked her as royal made her easy for the guards to monitor. Cobalt-blue scales rimmed in gold extended from the tip of her fins, all the way up her tail, turning to a sea green along her torso toward her neck and ending with a smattering of scales around her green eyes.

She gave another soft tail flick that propelled her gently through the palace garden and over the moss roses which had never bloomed in her lifetime. She took a moment to circle around and look at the unremarkable, stubby plants. *No need to watch me, guards. I'm simply inspecting the garden.*

"Mairin, play with us," called a young mermaid as a group of them cut in front of her, trying to catch dartfish.

"Maybe later." She flicked her tail to give a boost to a mermaid falling behind.

"Thank you, Princess," said the little one as she wiggled by.

Mairin continued on, glancing back at the undersea palace where the strict queen lived—for she was queen first, mother second. The palace was built into an ancient coral reef at the heart of the kingdom. Mussel shells that opened and closed with the tide covered the roof. Coral columns adorned with sea glass and shells of white and pearl shone light into the kingdom, which lay inside an old seamount.

Mairin's own grotto was tucked away at the back of the compound with only a tiny garden of sea lavender flowers for her to tend. The queen had

placed her as far from the entrance as possible, and Mairin had to swim through the entire household when she wanted to leave.

Another guard. The muscular triton floated with his arms crossed near the pathway leaving the outer courtyard. His tail barely moved, but his sharp eyes scanned the busy area filled with merpeople going about their business. She altered her path before he noticed her. *So many guards today.*

With determination, Mairin eased through the abandoned garden that once belonged to the infamous Little Mermaid. Designed to resemble the sun, the circular garden consisted entirely of red flowers underneath a single red willow tree which swayed over an algae-covered statue.

They called it the Little Mermaid's statue, even though it wasn't her image. A heavy marble carving of a prince had plunked down on the seabed many years ago in the center of the Little Mermaid's garden.

To most merpeople today, the statue was merely a symbol that the world above the sea existed. Mer society used to reflect what happened above-sea, sharing similar languages and societal structure as the humans. But who knew what went on up there now?

Because of what the Little Mermaid did one hundred years ago, merpeople were banned from surfacing. Used to be that on their fifteenth birthdays, they went up to breathe the air for the first time and celebrate that their lungs were strong enough to surface. Now, all merpeople were held

undersea by an invisible barrier. The barrier, clear as water and flexible like seaweed, would remain in place for another two hundred years.

It had been two years since Mairin's lungs had matured and more than anything, she wanted to go up to the surface and breathe air, like all generations of merpeople before her had done. She wanted to float on the waves and watch the flying fish playing in the sun. Miss Pearl, an elder, said sound was different above water, and Mairin wanted to hear it for herself.

While the older merpeople avoided the overgrown garden, the younger ones liked to frighten each other with stories of sea polyps lying in wait to grab a tail, holding a mermaid captive for the finfolk to find. Mairin usually stayed away from the garden because it was a constant reminder of the reason the merpeople could no longer surface.

Beyond the Little Mermaid's garden, an elderly mermaid with a bright pink tail tended her own garden. Miss Pearl. The only way for young mermaids to learn about the world above-sea was to rely on the old stories the elders like Miss Pearl remembered. Her enthusiasm for above-sea lore was unmatched—from her fascination with tea rituals to her love of dogs.

Mairin felt the tiniest twinge of guilt for leaving now instead of staying for their meeting. Miss Pearl wanted to speak with her alone before the nightly singing, but the elder wouldn't tell anyone if Mairin was late.

As Marin left the boundary of her kingdom, she angled up as she swam, quickly, as she hadn't much time before someone else might miss her. Just a little farther, and she swam through a tight valley and into open water.

When Mairin turned toward the slope that would lead her to shore, something grabbed her tail. She spun around to see a handsome junior guard holding on to her.

Zale. He would be the one to follow her. As a newly appointed guard, he was a little too eager to please her father. Zale had eyes like seawater after a

storm, and his tail was dark enough that he could hide in the shadows without her noticing.

"Not so fast," he said. "The queen put the scavenging grounds off limits until summer because the finfolk migration has started."

The finfolk were a sorcerer race of shape-shifters, able to form legs and walk on land. Ruled by the sea witch, they were unpredictable and harbored anger toward the merpeople since they, too, had been barred from surfacing.

“She said starting today. It can start after I get back.” Mairin twitched her tail and wiggled out of his grasp. Not that she was going to the scavenging grounds.

“No way, duckling. If you want to find something to decorate your garden, you’re not getting it today.” Zale swam in front of her, blocking her path.

“You know I don’t like it when you call me that.” She tried to swim around, but he blocked her again.

“You’re not going anywhere.” Zale remained firm. “Especially alone.

It’s too dangerous.”

Zale didn’t know the half of what she’d been doing lately. She faced him square on. “Was it too dangerous when you and Kai went to the shipwreck yesterday?”

Zale’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Apparently we had you for backup if the finfolk came along.” He crossed his arms and grinned like the arrogant merman he was. “You know, if you want to lose the nickname, you have to quit following me around.”

“I’m not following you.”

“Seems like you were.”

“No, the shipwreck is where the best sea cucumbers are. I wanted to make sure you two didn’t take them all.” Mairin should have kept quiet.

She didn’t want Zale to figure out that she hadn’t been following them because she was already there. The sea cucumber was her mother’s favorite,

so it didn’t hurt to have one with her when sneaking back into the palace after exploring along the shore.

Zale’s jovial expression disappeared. “Mairin, I can’t look the other way anymore. I work for your father now, and I want to do a good job. Kai and I

were doing scientific work. Elder Rush has a theory about the currents, and we wanted to see if he was right."

"Science? That's your excuse for going outside of the seamount?"

"We're working on something big."

"Like the time you tried to catch a shark so you could see if they really had that many rows of teeth?"

"How were we to know you'd swim into the trap?"

She shook her head. "Doesn't matter. Growing up with you two, I learned to take care of myself."

"Then we were good for something, were we not?"

Mairin had to get him moving, or she'd never make it out to the shore and back before their nightly singing. Zale's new responsibilities were proving bothersome to her plans. But Zale never could resist a challenge, and she had an idea. She tapped her finger on her lips.

"I bet I can beat you in a race to the shipwreck." She suspected the edge of the barrier was near the coast, and if she could get Zale as far as the ship, she might talk him into going farther.

"I doubt it, little duckling."

"Care to challenge me?"

"Any time."

"How about now?" she said. "If I win, you drop the nickname. If you win, I won't let it slip to the queen that you and Kai are up to something."

He hesitated, his gaze darting over her shoulder.

She turned around. *Great.* Now her brother was tagging along. She might slip past Zale, but Kai too? He might suspect she was up to something

more.

“Scared she’s got you, Zale?” Kai taunted.

“Not at all.” Zale casually put his arm around Mairin. “I can swim faster than this *little duckling* any time.”

She swam out from under his embrace and shoved him away.

“I’ll win.” Zale locked eyes with her. “And when I do, you come home with us and keep our visit to the shipwreck a secret.”

“I want in on that.” Her brother shot Zale a conspiratorial wink.

“Deal. First to the galley wins.” Mairin took off before they had a chance to react. She might be fast in the short term, but her speed was no match for a merman’s power. By making the end-point inside the ship, she could slip in through a small gash in the side, whereas they would have to enter through the top. And at least this way, she had a chance of winning. In fact, she might earn their silence and get rid of her childhood nickname all in one swoop.

The sea was unusually empty. With no schools of fish or those slow and silly turtles to work around, they made good time. Kai and Zale swam overhead and reached the sunken steel ship first.

Small orange and brown rusticles dripped from the rails giving the vessel a spooky appearance. How foolish of humans to build such weak vessels. Their ships ended up at the bottom of the sea where the ocean reclaimed them.

Mairin swam through the gash in the hull and within seconds had made her way through the collapsed floors and into the galley. Meanwhile, Zale and Kai banged their way down the hall as they knocked each other around trying to be first. Quickly, she grabbed a teacup and saucer and floated on her back like she’d been waiting minutes, not seconds.

They tried to squeeze through the door together, smashing the decaying wood on either side. Zale burst in first, with Kai not far behind.

Mairin faked a surprised look. “Good of you to join me. Tea?”

Zale smiled and took the teacup. “Don’t mind if I do.”

But Kai scowled, getting between her and Zale. “I don’t like that you sneak off alone like this. What are you doing anyway?”

Without meaning to, she looked up through the small hole in the ship, and Kai figured it out immediately.

“Not the barrier again. Look, you’re going to hurt yourself trying to break through. You can’t do it. I agreed to this race, so I could make you come home with us.”

Before Mairin could explain her theory, a long, low horn sounded. The three looked at each other in alarm. The emergency horn sounded again, calling all merpeople to the palace. All the way out at the shipwreck the sound was faint, but distinct.

“Go, go, go!” Zale herded them through the ship as his triton training kicked in. Zale and Kai assumed positions protecting the princess as they raced back to the kingdom. Kai led the way, followed by Mairin, trailed by Zale.

A large school of herring blocked their way, but shifted position, opening a gap for them.

“What do you think the alarm is about?” Mairin asked.

“The attacks, of course.” Kai scanned the area.

“What attacks?”

Zale answered. “Your father has the tritons on high alert. We’ve been monitoring the perimeter for weeks. There have been signs that the finfolk plan to cause trouble during their migration.”

Mairin bit her lip. Even when the queen issued new orders today, Mairin assumed the restrictions were mostly aimed at herself, to keep her from experimenting with the barrier. She didn't like that her brother and Zale had noticed something about her beloved home that she'd missed.

She took a shortcut, darting through a small opening in a coral outcrop where they couldn't follow. From there, the fastest way back into the kingdom led through the seamount's main entrance, a tunnel tucked behind

a coral wall. A triton guard who blended into the rocky surface swam forward. He wanted her to know he was there, guarding their land.

She acknowledged him with a curt nod before entering.

Hidden from the casual passerby, the plain entrance belied the magical world the merpeople had created in their grotto. "No need to tell everyone where we are" was oft-said to the young merpeople when their elders taught them about their defenses. "If they can't see you, they can't harm you."

But they can hear us. Beautiful singing flowed through the water. The song was soft and melodic. Mairin hadn't realized how far into the sea their voices carried. Each of the merpeople had the gift of singing. No one voice was better than another, only different. Each was pitch perfect and soothing to the ears, and to hear them all together as one voice overwhelmed her.

She loved the merpeople and their hidden kingdom. The crusty seamount. The ancient coral reef that formed their homes. The kindness of the elders who put up with her endless questions about above-sea. Nothing would tempt her to join the humans in their world. She only wanted the full experience of existing both below-and above-sea. She wanted that for all merpeople.

As Mairin drew near to the heart of the kingdom—the queen's palace—

her alarm grew. At this time of day, the palace garden was normally alive with activity and happy voices. Instead, it was empty.

Kai and Zale caught up and flanked her.

“See anything?” Zale whispered. He was coiled and ready for action.

“Nothing,” Kai answered. “But the guard wouldn’t have let us enter if it wasn’t safe.”

The singing grew louder here. It was a song of healing. Someone had been hurt.

Heart pounding, Mairin surged forward and joined the throng inside the courtyard. She examined the sad faces. The queen’s attendants, marked by

their thin golden armbands, bore mournful expressions, arms looped in solidarity. The mermaid beside her kept her gaze on the seabed as she sang.

Mairin searched for her closest loved ones, friends and family members.

There was Anemone, her best friend, with her hands over her face. The queen? Mairin’s breath caught. Where was her mother? Mairin squeezed her way through the merpeople until she saw a path to the throne.

Yes, her mother was seated with three of her sisters flanking her. Their short hair, once long and beautiful, floated straight up, the queen’s hair framing her crown. The royal sisters’ hair stood in contrast to the flowing locks of all the other mermaids. Mairin always thought their short hair made them look tough. Weathered. Another sign of what their sister, the Little Mermaid, did to them. Two more sisters yet living had moved to other kingdoms years ago.

Who were they singing to? She couldn’t ask without someone realizing she’d been gone and risk them telling her mother what a disgrace that her daughter cared so little for their kingdom during a time of crisis.

She joined in the singing. Quietly at first, then she added her voice to the melancholy tune as if she’d been there the entire time.

Kai whispered, “Can you tell what’s going on?”

She lifted her hands, indicating she didn’t know.

His brow furrowed, and he left, but was back within seconds. He held Mairin’s elbow. “I’m sorry,” he said, close to her ear. “It’s Miss Pearl.”

CHAPTER 2

A lone with her family in the inner court, Mairin let her defenses down. They gathered around Miss Pearl on the queen's own couch, a blue coral formation topped with massaging sea anemones. Aunt Emerald gently arranged Miss Pearl's pink tail while Aunt Jade stroked Pearl's long hair. Pearl's eyes were closed, her breathing shallow.

Mairin looked away. "What happened?"

"The patrol found her near the kelp beds. Someone tried to take her tongue." The queen shook her head. "Why would she go outside the kingdom? What possessed her?"

Mairin bit her lip. She knew what Kai would say. *Out chasing after your folly. I bet Miss Pearl went out after you. That's why she was attacked.* "Is she going to be okay?"

"We think so. There's also a lump on her head, so we suspect that her body has shut down to heal. But let's focus on you. You and Neme were the last ones to spend time with Miss Pearl this morning." The queen's gaze locked with Mairin's. "What did you talk about?" Her eyes were not accusatory, but her voice held an edge to it.

"Nothing that would make her leave the kingdom, if that's what you're implying." Mairin crossed her arms. They had been looking through the

small library of books Miss Pearl had collected over the years and kept in a pirate's trunk to protect the fragile paper from the currents.

"Peridot." Aunt Em touched the queen's arm, a gesture to remind her to go easy on Mairin. The aunts didn't go against the queen, but they did try to diffuse the tension between mother and daughter. Mairin loved them for that.

"Emerald, I'm asking, not accusing."

In a rush of water, Mairin's father entered the room. As the head of the triton guards, he was responsible for the safety of the kingdom. His face was grim.

"It's been taken care of."

The queen nodded once.

"And there are signs it was a finfolk attack." He held up a species of seaweed that didn't grow anywhere near their grotto, but was prevalent in the north where the finfolk came from. They liked to braid it into their hair.

Mairin had only seen the finfolk from a distance. The finmen grew tall and lean, with long fins along their bodies, almost like seaweed themselves.

The finwives were more curvy and adaptable, like the octopus, though they lost their youthful looks at a faster rate than the finmen.

The queen clenched her fists. "Why now?"

Father shook his head. "There's been no news."

"Kai?" the queen asked. "What have you learned?"

Kai looked up from the corner where he and Zale had been conferring.

What was Zale still doing here? Mairin tried to catch his attention, but he ignored her, fascinated by a shell he flipped over his fingers and sent cascading back again.

"I have nothing to add," Kai said. "Our traps haven't been disturbed."

Mairin perked up. They had traps? What traps? Her attention swung to Zale. *Look at me.* Zale continued to fidget with the shell.

Finally, the queen noticed Zale. "You should go," she said to him.

"We'll see you tomorrow."

Zale quickly bowed his head, then left, not once glancing at Mairin.

She glared after him. Maybe she *should* have been watching the two of them.

The queen turned to Mairin next. “That will be all. We’ll talk more later.”

Mairin looked to her dad for support. He was the strong, silent type, backing his queen. He had married into the royal family and had no direct power over the kingdom. The family, yes. He at least could be reasonable, and the queen often listened to his advice. Surely he would think she should stay.

“There’s nothing more to do tonight. Get some rest for tomorrow,” he said.

Mairin’s hopes sank. She knew it was useless to argue if they were both in agreement. She shot a glance at Kai as if to say, *you’re letting him stay*, but the plea went unheeded. Fine. Kai would tell her if she missed anything important. Or at least, he used to tell her things. How much had he been hiding lately?

She slowly swam away, hoping to hear what direction the conversation would take as Father leaned in.

“They’re getting bold,” her mother said, then paused. “Kai, you too.

Out.”

“But—” He set his lips firm and caught up with Mairin at the entrance.

Mairin glanced back at her mother and father, looking seriously at each other.

“We’ve kept our end of it,” the queen said, then paused.

“She knows we’re still here,” Kai said. He swam out to the inner courtyard where Zale was waiting for them.

Mairin wanted to linger to hear what bargain her mother referred to.

Seemed like another conversation they should let her in on. How was she to take over the kingdom one day when her mother refused to reveal the deepest kingdom secrets?

As soon as they left the throne room, Kai began to lecture. “Next time you feel like breaking a rule, stay within the seamount.”

Mairin’s adrenaline spiked. “I can take care of myself.”

“Let’s hope you’re never forced to find out if that’s true.”

Lately, her younger brother had been prone to lecture her, which was especially galling since he didn’t share the weight on her shoulders, knowing she would be queen next. Their mother never watched Kai so strictly, and Zale could be missing for an entire season, and no one would be worried he’d gone to the surface and fallen in love with a human girl. It was as if the entire kingdom was waiting for her alone to make a mistake.

When the elders thought they were whispering, she heard them as she swam by. “She’s just like her. Same temperament.”

Mairin knew she wasn’t the only one longing to see the sun. Longing to feel the warmth on her face. To taste the fresh rain before it pattered onto the salt water. To put sights, sounds, and even feelings to the images Miss Pearl described.

Kai probably would have said more if Zale hadn’t intercepted them.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

Now he wanted to talk to her? Mairin stormed past, but he caught up.

“I’m sorry about Miss Pearl. I know she is special to you.”

Miss Pearl. Mairin’s heart squeezed. She’d been so wrapped up in being angry at her mother, she’d not yet processed what had happened. She looked away as Anemone joined them.

“I’ll take it from here.” Neme flipped her flowing red hair over her shoulder and steered Mairin to a secluded corner of the court, grabbing some food from the buffet along the way.

“I still can’t believe it,” Neme effused. “Miss Pearl. She’s our favorite elder. It’s like she’s the only one who wants us to know anything.”

Mairin shot a look at her brother to let him know she was still mad at him, but Zale had turned him around so he couldn’t see her. Ever the peacemaker. Zale nodded at her.

“I can’t believe it either. What is everyone saying?”

Neme’s eyes opened wide. “Mairin, this is bad. Miss Pearl isn’t the first.

Remember old Marina, who was injured mysteriously last month? And what about Laguna? Something happened to her outside the boundary. The elders are being targeted. There are other strange stories, and they all had something to do with your aunt’s little adventure above-sea. That’s why the elders are being so tight-lipped about it.”

Mairin closed her eyes. *When would they be rid of the Little Mermaid’s foolishness?* Mairin saw the looks, heard the whispers, felt the expectations placed on her.

“If what you say is true—that there’s this pattern—then what of your Grandma Opal?”

Neme nodded. “My parents have already taken steps to protect her.

They won’t let her go anywhere by herself. Not even to her weekly garden meeting. She’s livid. Her moss roses are her life. She told my parents their restrictions would bore her to death.”

Mairin let out a small laugh. “Good for her. She’s right. My father’s guards keep us safe. What harm could come to her at a garden meeting? As long as she stays in the grotto, she’ll be fine. Miss Pearl went outside…for some reason.”

“So, your mother did tell you something.”

Mairin flicked her tail. “That was all. I thought everyone knew that part already.”

While they were talking, a mermaid with unadorned scales swam with purpose through the common area. Her strokes were strong and sure, her

distinctive pink tail so like another mermaid Mairin knew well. And she wore a gold armband as those in the queen’s court wore.

“Who is that?” Neme asked.

The mermaid flashed a ruby ring at the guards, and they let her pass without question.

Mairin was too stunned to answer. The new mermaid was the spitting image of Miss Pearl. A *younger* Miss Pearl. “Miss Pearl’s daughter?”

“Poor thing,” Neme said. “She must have heard the news about her mother.”

“No, you don’t understand. Miss Pearl’s daughter was my mother’s best friend. After my aunt…did what she did, it was Nahla who kept my mother from falling apart.”

“So?”

“She’s been gone for years.” Mairin turned to follow Nahla into the palace. “I’ll talk to you later, Neme.”

The ruby ring sparked a memory. Miss Pearl had one. So did Grandma Opal. *Hmm. Grandma Opal.* The ruby rings weren’t a fashion trend or more mermaids would have them. Those Mairin’s age liked to add hair combs and the occasional belt around their waists. The belts were useful and could hold pockets in which to keep treasures or food. Mairin refused to wear one because she didn’t want anyone to think she was a collector like her aunt had been. So much of her life was lived trying to show everyone who she wasn’t instead of who she was.

With a certain aloofness, Mairin swam between the guards, hoping they wouldn't stop her. She continued through to her mother's private chambers.

Offering words of concern to Miss Pearl's daughter would be the perfect excuse to wheedle her way into the conversation.

She paused at the seaweed curtain and leaned in to listen to the muffled voices. Mother and Miss Pearl's daughter were too quiet for Mairin to make

out what they were saying. Determined, Mairin pushed her way through the curtain.

Mother sat beside Miss Pearl's daughter, holding both her hands in comfort. Though they'd been separated for most of Mairin's life, it looked like they remained close.

Mother didn't even look up. "Come in," she said.

Nahla's gaze followed Mairin's entrance, and she rose to meet her. "You must be Mairin. You've grown so much since I last saw you."

Mairin didn't expect the warm hug she received. Miss Pearl was expressive in how she doted on the younger merpeople, but the way Nahla swam through the court with such authority, Mairin expected her to be more reserved.

"I'm sorry you had to return under such terrible circumstances," Mairin said. "Miss Pearl is a favorite among the merpeople my age. We're terribly sorry she's been hurt."

"I got here as fast as I could. The currents from the Caribbean were slower than usual." She looked over in the dark corner where they'd moved Miss Pearl. "Her scales look good."

"You swam all the way from the Caribbean?" Mairin was aghast.

"To be honest, I'd already started out on my own accord. But there's a reason the sailfish have nothing on us. A mermaid can swim when she has

to, Mairin. Don’t forget that.” She reclined back in a chair. “But it takes a lot out of you. I’m going to need to recover.”

“If you didn’t know about Miss Pearl when you started out, why were you coming here?”

“I had to speak with your mother about the increasing finfolk attacks.

We must not lose ground.” She tilted her head thoughtfully. “A day earlier, and I would have been able to talk with Mom, and she might not have left the protection of the seamount.”

Mairin looked away. “I’m sorry.” Her apologies couldn’t change the situation, and Mairin pushed down the thought that it was all her fault.

Just then Mairin noticed the disapproving look the queen was giving Nahla. It was a look Mairin knew well, having received more than her share of disapproving looks.

What did Nahla say that was out of place? Mairin reviewed the brief conversation while Nahla swam back to the queen’s side. “What do you mean ‘we must not lose ground’?” Mairin asked.

“You haven’t told her?” Nahla said. “Nothing?”

“Told me about what? Does Kai know?”

“She’s only seventeen, Nahla.”

Nahla chuckled sadly. “We’d surfaced by then, Peridot. We knew a lot.

Probably more than we should have.” Nahla studied Mairin with such sympathy Mairin didn’t know how to react. Could Miss Pearl’s daughter, the queen’s best friend, be an ally?

“Don’t remind her. She’s gotten her back up about not surfacing. But you know my father put up that barrier. It’s not coming down until three hundred years have passed and the humans view us as legend.”

The queen rose and floated to the seaweed curtain separating her private chambers from the rest of the palace. “My children know all they need to know.” The queen waved Mairin forward. “Off you go. It’s been a long day.

We’ll talk more in the morning.”

“Can’t I stay and talk about Miss Pearl?” If anyone could convince the queen to tell Mairin what was going on, Mairin suspected Nahla could.

Mairin looked pleadingly at the newcomer. “I could tell you stories about your mother.”

“Mairin!” The queen’s tone held a warning. “Don’t you even try to play off Nahla’s sympathies to get what you want.”

Mairin startled at the rebuke. “I’m ready to learn deeper things about our kingdom. If you’d only give me a chance.”

The queen’s expression never changed.

“I’ll see you tomorrow?” Mairin deliberately turned from the queen to ask Nahla.

The mermaid nodded. “Don’t be in a hurry,” Nahla said. “The outside world is fraught with dangers you’ll learn about soon enough.”

Mairin couldn’t tell if Nahla was giving her a hint about what she might tell her later, or if her mom’s best friend was retreating to side with the queen.

Mairin exited without another word. She was so preoccupied with analyzing the conversation that at first, she didn’t notice Zale had returned and waited with Kai.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“Not so fast. What did you learn?” Kai said, keeping his voice low.

Mairin narrowed her eyes. “You first.”

Kai exchanged a look with Zale and nodded.

“Father let it slip that the finfolk have been attacking all the mermaid settlements, not just ours. Nahla’s too. Minor attacks, not enough to warrant a reaction from us, but enough to get our attention.”

Zale moved closer and lowered his voice. “And why now? We’ve been at peace ever since…” He left the rest unsaid and Mairin filled in the blank.

Ever since the sea witch was banished.

“Do they think she’s escaped?”

“No,” Kai said. “They’ve checked. She’s still confined to her floating kingdom in the north.”

Mairin twirled her hair around her finger. A habit she had formed since she noticed it bothered her mother, whose hair was too short to twirl. *Why are they bothering us now?*

“Your turn. What’s going on in there?” Kai jerked his chin toward the queen’s chambers.

“A reunion. Miss Pearl’s daughter is back. She thought I knew more than I do and, more importantly, that I *should* know more.”

“You’d better not be thinking about what I think you’re thinking about.”

Zale took on his protective big brother persona again. “You can’t go outside the boundary. Not until it’s safe.”

Mairin gave him her best innocent expression. “Who said anything about going outside the boundary? I plan to visit with Neme’s grandmother tomorrow.” If anyone would talk openly with her, it would be Grandma Opal.

CHAPTER 3

T he next morning, Mairin went directly to Grandma Opal’s garden.

“Thought I’d see you today,” Grandma Opal said, looking up from her kelp bed. “Watch out for the brittle stars, they’re cleaning up for me.”

Grandma Opal had trained the corals to grow by color, creating clumps of greens, oranges, pinks, and blues. And whereas other gardeners used human artifacts as decorations, she’d created an environment entirely made from the sea. Even her garden snakes poked their noses up out of the seabed and bobbed their heads in approval with the current.

“What a beautiful sun coral you have here.”

“The pride of my garden. I’m the only one who’s managed to keep one alive. I think it’s because of my proximity to the open sea.”

Mairin looked out past the rocky boundary. A guard swam by in the distance, checking the perimeter while a large spotted wolffish looked unperturbed as it swam in place. Mairin turned around so the open sea wouldn’t tempt her. “Did you know that Nahla is back?”

Grandma Opal nodded slowly. “She came to see me.”

“Already? Did you enjoy reminiscing?”

“A little. But mostly we talked about you.”

“Me?” Mairin looked up from the seahorse she was playing with. It swam away and latched its tail around a stalk of sugar kelp. “What about me?”

Grandma Opal laughed, clapping her hands together. Her ruby ring glistened and reminded Mairin that the rings seemed to have some significance.

“She wanted to know about your character.”

Oh. Mairin changed the subject. “She’s got a ring just like yours. Why?”

Grandma Opal splayed her fingers out and admired her ring. “A sisterhood,” she said. “One of those things you do when you are young and full of enthusiasm. We pledged ourselves to one another and to our queen.”

“My mother?”

“She was in a terrible state when her sister passed on. You know, from the start, the Little Mermaid took risks. The queen and her other sisters only went as far as Land’s End. But the Little Mermaid? She went all the way into Castle Bay. She was one to test boundaries.” Grandma Opal looked at Mairin with a bemused glance.

Mairin looked away, focusing her attention back on the seahorse as it let go of one stalk of kelp and moved to another.

“Then your grandfather suddenly passed. Seemed to us it was tied to the Little Mermaid, the curse, and the sea witch. Hard to know exactly what happened, but your mother was thrust into leadership too soon. We knew she’d need our help, and so we formed our society.”

“Why aren’t we taught this?”

“You didn’t need to know.”

“But you’re telling me now.”

Grandma Opal nodded. “Pearl would have shared it with you, had you asked about the rings. Until you’re ready to learn something, we don’t always tell you.”

“You mean you won’t teach me the important things until I notice them first?” Mairin snorted. “How am I to know what to ask?”

“It’s worked so far. Your mother’s idea.” She handed Mairin a clam shell. “Here, dig into those moss roses and scrape out the weeds. If I let them, they’ll take over my rock garden there.”

Mairin set to work around the stubby green plants. “Why are these called roses if they don’t have flowers?”

“The moss rose is a special plant. One day they will bloom, and until then, I’ll keep tending them. Have faith. You’ll see.”

Mairin worked out her irritation by scraping around the multicolored stones in the rock garden. “Are you telling me the queen knows about my extra education?” What didn’t her mother know about her? The realization made Mairin want to do something totally unexpected, so her mother would be surprised if she ever found out.

“This garden is my own,” Grandma Opal said, not answering the question. “It’s a place where I can express myself and create something beautiful to share with others. People know about it, but it’s still my own.

However—and this is important—I don’t need anyone else’s interest or approval for me to enjoy my work. There is joy in the creation. Where do you find joy, Mairin?”

Mairin wondered when Grandma Opal would get to the point. Miss Pearl taught. Grandma Opal asked questions.

“I would find joy in my freedom,” Mairin answered honestly. “To surface like the merpeople used to do would be my greatest joy. To give back what the Little Mermaid took from my people.”

Grandma Opal raised an eyebrow. “Your people? Seems like we are currently your mother’s responsibility.”

“You know what I mean. I know what’s expected in my future. My life is not my own.”

“Ah, but you act like it is your own. You can’t be double-minded in your ways if you are to be a strong queen.”

Mairin frowned. Grandma Opal was not what she expected. She handed back the shell. “Thanks for the lesson, but I’d best be going.” She darted

away before Grandma Opal could ask her to do anything else. No wonder Neme didn't want to come along with Mairin. Grandma Opal's idea of teaching was to put you to work.

As Mairin swam back along the edge of the kingdom, she passed several more guards keeping watch. Her already confined life closed in tighter and tighter. Mairin thought not being allowed to surface was the worst punishment for a mermaid, but not being able to swim free might be worse.

She came to a gap in the coral and, without pausing to think, wiggled through the small space. One quick race out to sea and back again. One last chance to swim fast. If the guards charged after her, so be it. What could they do but make her turn around?

Mairin darted out, and, finding her current, shot off into the deep. She glanced behind, and sure enough, a dark shadow followed. She was surprised at how quickly a guard had noticed and got around the outcrop.

But the guard was keeping distant, so maybe it was only Zale. Let him follow and think he was protecting her.

She reflected on what Grandma Opal had shared, and her mind kept circling back to Castle Bay. What if the barrier ended near the castle?

Everything in her life was connected to the Little Mermaid, so it made sense. Mairin pushed herself like she'd never done before, testing herself to see if she could be as fast as Nahla.

She'd been gone for a good ten minutes, swimming at full speed, but the guard still hadn't stopped her. Mairin smiled, but then faltered. The abyss was coming up, and if the finfolk were anywhere, they'd be hiding near the abyss. It was a dark, jagged cut in the seafloor, constantly in danger of a

landslide. Nothing grew and few sea creatures ventured near it. She may be daring, but she wasn't foolish. Just a few more strokes and she'd turn around. There would be another opportunity to visit Castle Bay.

But there, coming at her from an angle, another mermaid form took shape, speeding her way. A glint of a gold arm band caused Mairin to pull up short. She was from the queen's court.

Mairin steeled herself for the confrontation, lining up her argument, trying to make her disobedience sound virtuous. Within moments, Nahla was in front of her, her forehead lined with worry.

"Mairin. I'm glad I found you. If I gave you a monumental kingdom task, can I count on you?"

All Mairin's arguments poured out of her mind. She'd expected to be chastised and ordered home. She spluttered, "Of course. Whatever you need."

"Your mother needs help, and we think you'd be perfect to take care of this royal duty."

Mairin tried not to look disinterested. If the queen sent Nahla, the vaunted royal duty was bound to be something like watching the young ones while the elders had a meeting. "I'm not a babysitter."

A hint of impatience flickered across Nahla's features. "This is important, not a joke."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to sound that way."

"Ever take one of the human's objects and hidden it? Followed one of their males when they were in the water?"

Now Mairin was insulted. She'd thought Nahla was different from the others in mother's court. Not every young mermaid was like the queen's wayward sister. "I have zero interest in the land people. They can hardly spend an hour in the water before needing to get out. It's pathetic. And if the water is cold, it's even worse." She spouted back what she'd heard from the elder merpeople. Was that definitive enough?

Nahla's deep purple eyes bored into hers as if searching for deception.

“Good. Because we need you to go above-sea.”

CHAPTER 4

N ahla waited expectantly for Mairin’s answer, but Mairin was stunned. No one went above the barrier. At least, that’s what they’d been told.

“Close your mouth, you look like a tuna.” Nahla waved her hand in front of Mairin’s face. “You’ve been trying to go above-sea, haven’t you?”

The way Nahla said it meant she already knew. Which meant the queen knew. Which meant they had cause to think she was acting like the Little Mermaid.

Mairin pushed her hands in front of her in a stop motion. “Did you say you wanted me to go above-sea? You know we can’t. There’s a barrier that prevents it.”

“Not everything is as it seems. You might not need to go through the barrier, but you ought to be able to do so, if necessary. Your aunt Sapphire will teach you what to do.” Nahla gently held Mairin’s shoulders. “You said you were ready. We’re trusting you.”

Mairin bit her lip. “I did say that, didn’t I?”

Nahla offered her the chance to do the one thing Mairin had wanted to do for as long as she could remember. Mairin should be elated. But to learn that she’d been lied to all these years sent her emotions into a whirlpool.

She’d been betrayed by her own family, who knew how desperately she

wanted to go above-sea. She tried to keep the bitterness out of her voice.

“How many others know about this?”

“Only the sisterhood. I don’t even know if your father knows.”

Some of the bitterness eased as Mairin realized she wasn’t the only one who had been lied to. “How does it work?”

“Go to your aunt Sapphire in the waters near southern England. She’ll explain everything.”

“Miss Pearl taught us what to do above-sea. All I need to know is how to get through the barrier.” Saying the words brought a slight smile to her face. She couldn’t help herself. There would be time to sort through her feelings later, after she’d gone above-sea.

“I assumed she did. Have you practiced looking through the water to get your bearings so you don’t pop up and scare a human?”

Mairin laughed. Humans were so easily frightened. “Miss Pearl’s favorite lesson was on how to move undetected.”

She and Nahla quoted together: “Be the seaweed.”

Nahla smiled. “She was always good at that.” Then her smile faded, replaced by a knotted brow.

“Miss Pearl will come through,” Mairin said. “The queen is hopeful, and everyone is taking good care of her.”

Nahla nodded. “Yes. She will. Meanwhile, we must protect the kingdom. Your task is to deliver a message to your aunt Sapphire and then take her place. She’ll give you more instructions on what to do then.”

“But what is she doing near England? I thought she was in the Caribbean with you.”

“She’s part of the sisterhood.” Nahla wiggled her ring finger. “And we need her home to protect the queen.”

“You really think my mother is in danger?” Usually, Mairin referred to her mother as the queen, but suddenly what was happening had become

very personal. She thought of Miss Pearl, lying so still in mother’s chamber.

“My father will protect her.”

“Yes, as we fear Peridot is the target, the triton guard isn’t letting her go anywhere. Your father and the rest of the guard can protect the kingdom unless the finfolk send their finwives, rendering the men ineffectual. Then the sisterhood is needed.”

Mairin’s blood turned cold. She’d only heard about the finwives. By their reputation, they were relentless. They would attack the men first with their mesmerizing voices and then come after the women.

“Shouldn’t I stay here, then?” she swallowed. “To help.”

“One day, you will be trained in our ways. But for now, we need Sapphire here. And you’ll be needed to take her place. Her job is vital, and she can’t leave unless we send her a replacement.”

“What is she doing that is so important? She’s not guarding the sea witch, is she?” Mairin’s stomach clenched. *No, they wouldn’t let me go near the sea witch. They’d be too afraid I’d repeat the Little Mermaid’s mistake.*

“*Hmm.* It’s more shocking than that.” Nahla pointed to open sea. “Swim with me while we talk. It’ll get you there faster. My scouts say these waters are free from finmen, but be vigilant just in case. Remember, you can outswim them.”

More shocking than guarding the sea witch? As they set off, Mairin glanced behind. That dark shadow hovering by an outcropping of rock might be Zale. If it was another triton guard on duty, he wouldn’t be hiding.

She ought to point him out to Nahla, but what if he was Zale? He’d be reprimanded over allowing Mairin to get this far away from the boundary.

Nahla’s gaze followed where Mairin was looking.

“Let’s go,” Mairin said. In a shot, she darted away.

Nahla burst into the lead. “You should know that above-sea there is a young male human,” Nahla began.

Another one? Figures.

“He has been under our protection since his birth.”

Mairin was so shocked, she almost stopped swimming. Then she mustered a burst of speed to keep up with Nahla, who was swimming faster than Mairin. “Pardon me? Whose protection? And what does that mean exactly?”

“All you need to know is that it is our obligation to see that no harm comes to him from the sea. That’s it. It’s a lonely job, but we’ll send a replacement for you as soon as we can.”

Mairin nodded to show she was listening. Not that it made any sense at all. She grappled with the idea that the mermaids were protecting a human.

Why?

“That’s the big, important kingdom task you have for me?”

“That’s it. Don’t be taking any romantic notions into your head about how wonderful it would be to become human. No falling in love with the human we are protecting. So help me, Mairin, if you even think about a human romantically…”

Mairin had never been so insulted. “Why are we protecting him?”

Nahla eased off her speed. “He’s the last direct descendant of the prince.

The one that your aunt gave her life for.” Nahla looked sideways at Mairin.

“We have an agreement.”

“What sort of agreement?”

“Your aunt gave us her beautiful voice in exchange for protection over her love’s family. Her gift is the reason we all sing so beautifully.”

“We protect this one human, and we continue to sing? How is that a good deal?”

“Before your aunt, our voices were not as lovely. Hers was unique, to say the least. It was also her dying request, though your mother didn’t know it when she agreed to the terms. Simultaneously, the Little Mermaid also passed on her above-sea knowledge.”

Mairin balled her hands into fists. *Unbelievable.* “That explains our voices, but what about our imprisonment undersea—that seems an excessive punishment considering some of us weren’t even alive when this all happened.” And what did mermaids previously sound like that her mother was okay with keeping this promise to her sister, deathbed promise or not?

Nahla abruptly stopped swimming. “Maybe this was a mistake. You’re still young, and apparently both too curious and too angry. Your aunt wasn’t much younger than you when she made her fateful choice.” Nahla shook her head. “There’s no time. I’ll just go myself. Hurry home and tell your mother what I’ve done.”

“No.” Mairin reached out her hands to stop her. “No, you need to stay with the queen. And our people. They’re scared.” She thought of Neme.

“And yes, I’m angry, because I don’t understand about the barrier, but I’m not so curious about the humans that I’ll make a mistake like the Little Mermaid did. I want to go above-sea, and I’m also ready to serve in whatever way you wish. You can trust me.”

Mairin twirled her hair around her finger, then abruptly stopped when it caught Nahla’s attention. “It would be impossible for me to fall in love with a human,” Mairin stated. “They are weak and heartless. They don’t deserve a mermaid’s love.” These were words she knew her mother would want to hear. It was the way her mother thought. Mairin was in full agreement, but she’d never been tested before. She’d never seen a human aside from a watery photograph in one of Miss Pearl’s books.

Mairin wanted to see the human world for herself, but she’d be strong.

It was the sirens who were known for being irresistible with their singing and leading men to their deaths. It was the finwives who were known for

kidnapping human males and forcing them into marriage. But mermaids had been helpful to humans. After all, even the Little Mermaid saved the

prince from drowning. She would leave the humans alone and they would leave her alone.

Nahla was clearly torn. Her tail twitched like she wanted to dart away.

“Now I’m worried you might be too bitter. These humans are frail folk.

They can’t survive in the water long if they fall in. You must save him if it’s in your power to do so.”

Mairin set her jaw firmly, mustering all her pride. “If he falls in, I’ll save him. No matter what.”

Nahla must have seen her renewed determination, for she nodded. “Very well, then. Off you go. Most likely, Sapphire will be at the port in Southampton, England. You should be able to make it there before anyone in the kingdom even knows you’re gone. Look for the largest ship in port, and you’ll find Sapphire. She’s been watching the prince since he was spotted spending a great deal of time at the shipyard in Belfast, Ireland watching the land people build this monstrosity. Highly unusual behavior for him, which has us all concerned. They’ve since moved the ship down to the major port, so that’s likely where your aunt will be. The ship is called *Titanic*.”

“*Titanic*.” Mairin repeated the name. It sounded big.

“When you find your aunt, she’ll show you how to find the prince and what you’ll need to do.”

Mairin twirled in excitement. She couldn’t help herself after all Nahla had revealed.

“Mairin, they’re different from us,” Nahla warned.

“I know!” *How can I convince everyone that I can be trusted to not make the same mistake as the Little Mermaid?*

Reading into Mairin’s reaction, Nahla said, “Don’t be frightened. They are many, and they build great machines. Keep in mind who you are and where you belong and you won’t lose your way.” She reached out and

touched Mairin’s flowing hair. “I’m telling you secrets that very few of us know. It’s a demonstration of your mother’s trust.”

“I won’t let her down.” There was a lot riding on how well she handled this assignment. It was the first time her mother had brought her into important kingdom business.

“Keep careful watch and do not engage with the finfolk.”

Nahla gave her a few more instructions and then directions to follow the coast. “You’ll know you’re getting close when the land closes in. You’ve gone too far if you see St. Catherine’s lighthouse. It’s easier to see at night, but you’ll still see it through the water in the day. It gives off a flash of light every five seconds.” She held Mairin tight. “No more time to waste. Please be circumspect.”

CHAPTER 5

T he miles sped away as Mairin raced toward England. She zipped over a sponge field and overtook another school of herring. This was what she was made for. To swim, and to swim fast. She wasn’t even tired, and this was the farthest she’d ever swam full out.

How could her mother and aunts keep such a big secret about the Little Mermaid? To think, they’d been protecting a human family for a hundred years. And that was the smallest of the secrets they were keeping. They also kept the ability to surface for themselves when no one else was allowed to be free, to be fully mermaid, breathing both water and air.

Her thoughts swirled back to the human. A human! What was her family doing helping one of them?

If he did fall over the edge of the ship, she would simply keep his face above water as she scooted him back to shore. Easy. She’d be so fast he wouldn’t have time to realize what was going on. She’d not even let him see her. Nor would she linger thinking about possibilities of marriage like the Little Mermaid did.

Mairin knew and had accepted that mermaids were not human. She was curious about their eternal souls, but she would not be tempted to gain something that wasn’t hers to gain.

Mairin followed the coastline until she came to a human port similar to what Nahla described. She’d passed several smaller docks already, but here was a large grouping of wood pylons covered in barnacles. This one was her first sign that she’d found a shipping port. But Nahla said Southampton wouldn’t be at the first port she came to. This port was still too far east.

Dutifully, Mairin swam underneath countless smaller vessels, looking for the great hull Nahla told her about. Mairin wasn’t completely ignorant of ships. Many of them passed over their kingdom, floating like the bellies of the great whales, only a lot louder.

The light drew Mairin upward. She slowly floated with her hands outstretched, ready to bump into the barrier that kept the merpeople below-sea. She'd waited her entire life, and it wouldn't be long now.

She turned and looked one last time for her aunt. Mairin wasn't the only creature in the sea this close to land. She spotted several schools of fish, and for one heart-pounding moment she thought she saw a finman dart around a ship.

With no sign of her aunt, Mairin continued along the coast. At one point, she was thrilled to find herself in the midst of a pod of playful dolphins. She reached out her hand to stroke one who swam beside her.

"Hello. You don't see many like me, do you?" she asked. "If I have my way, we'll be joining you above-sea." The dolphin chittered at her, then rose to the surface for a breath of air.

Mairin was ready to follow his example. "Thanks for showing me the way, but I have to wait for my aunt to reveal the secret."

As she continued west, she passed smaller bays and ports, nothing large enough to accommodate what Nahla had described. Mairin looked for a ship larger than their undersea palace that held all of their people. Mairin found it hard to fathom something that large that also moved on top of the sea, but here she was on a mission for the kingdom and with the promise of being able to surface. Anything was possible.

Eventually, she came upon a large, bustling port filled with ships of all sizes. As she swam under their hulls, her heart leaped. The surface above her was in constant motion. Small boats, big boats, black shapes bobbing on the surface, but nothing yet large enough to be a floating palace. Mairin flicked her tail and went deeper so she could look up with an unrestricted view to find her aunt.

And there it was. The largest hull she'd ever seen. It went on and on, unmistakable now that she was closer. The hull dropped so low in the water it wouldn't be able to get close to land. She swam over to it, full of curiosity. Three propellers waited to turn and set the ship in motion. The

hum of the engines sent small vibrations her way, but once the ship began to move, it would echo for miles to sensitive mermaid ears.

“Aunt Sapphire?” she called out. “It’s Mairin.”

No answering voice.

Mairin circled the ship, calling out for her aunt. She doubled back and looked all over the harbor. She even got dangerously close to the dock where the people might see her. What now? Nahla had said nothing about what to do if Sapphire wasn’t where she was supposed to be.

“Mairin? Is that you?”

Her aunt swam up to her. Aunt Sapphire had short black hair that floated straight up like it was a crown. Her tail was wide and powerful. “What’s happened?”

Mairin’s carefully crafted speech fled her mind. “Miss Pearl was attacked. She’s in a bad way.” Mairin didn’t mean to be so blunt, but Aunt Sapphire had startled her.

Aunt Sapphire hardly reacted. She simply looked toward home with her lips set.

“Nahla is back, and she sent me to replace you. You’re needed to help protect the queen.”

Sapphire’s gaze snapped to Mairin. “I knew it had to be serious if they sent you. Tell me everything.”

Trying not to take offense at Sapphire’s reaction, Mairin recalled the events from the past few days, answering more questions about life in the kingdom during the last few weeks.

“They think it’s the finfolk? I just chased one away before you arrived.

A finman named Moab. He’s a wily one.” Sapphire turned thoughtful. “I don’t want to leave you alone with that character here.”

“I’ll be fine,” Mairin said with false confidence. She didn’t like the idea of being alone with a finman nearby either. Not after seeing what they did to Miss Pearl. “Just show me how to surface.”

Sapphire raised an eyebrow.

“Nahla said you’d show me.” Mairin lowered the excitement in her voice. She needed Aunt Sapphire to agree. “And I know I’m only supposed to surface in an emergency.”

Sapphire laughed. “Don’t try to fool me, child. I know you’ll surface as much and as often as you please as soon as my back is turned.”

“I’m not like—”

Sapphire held up her hand.

“I know what you’re like, and you’d best remember to stay hidden.

Watching over the prince’s descendants is a great responsibility reserved for the sisterhood. Don’t disappoint the queen.”

Sapphire unclasped the pearl necklace she wore and placed it around Mairin’s throat. “Wear this at all times and you will be able to surface through the barrier.” She adjusted the pearls and then put her hands on Mairin’s shoulders. “You probably don’t like to hear it, but you do look like our Little Mermaid. The merpeople can’t help but associate you with her.”

“A pearl necklace?” Mairin dismissed the comment about her aunt, focusing on the piece of information that mattered. “This is the secret I’ve been looking for?” *If a pearl necklace is all we need, I could make them for*

my friends. Her pulse began to race. *We could go above-sea whenever we want.*

Sapphire shook her head. “Not any pearl necklace. It was hers. Only the Little Mermaid’s necklace allows us to go through the barrier into open sea.”

Mairin's aunt had been gone for one hundred years, yet life under the sea still revolved around her. "Anything of hers?"

Sapphire narrowed her eyes slightly and didn't answer.

Mairin's thoughts took off imagining the possibilities. *Wonder if there's a way to heft that statue up to the surface?* Her brother and Zale might be good accomplices. Zale was, after all, known for his strength. He could probably lift the statue all by himself. It might be big enough to break the barrier once and for all. "Because if it's that easy…"

"This is the only necklace we have. Do not play with it. Do not lose a single pearl, or you'll render it useless. In fact, don't even take it off. When I return, you give it straight back to me."

There was that tone of voice again, commanding like the queen's voice.

Mairin couldn't help but obey. "Yes, ma'am. You can trust me."

"Fine. Let's see you surface."

They swam to the front of the large ship where it pointed out into the vast ocean. Mairin floated under the surface, looking up at the ship. *Be the seaweed.*

Motion on the deck drew Mairin's gaze, and she saw her first set of humans. She froze in place. From underwater, their images wiggled and their warbled voices were hard to understand.

Her first live humans! Proud of her self-control, Mairin remained still, quietly observing from undersea. She had to be cautious and not startle them. Who knew what they would do if they saw her floating in their port?

She floated oh-so-close to the surface; the sun brighter than she'd ever seen it. Her heart raced with anticipation.

"What are you waiting for? Up you go."

Mairin hesitated. *Just like that? No ceremony? No last-minute instructions?*

“Pearl did teach you how, didn’t she?”

“Yes.” *Deep breaths. Swim up. Break the surface. Breathe through your nose and don’t panic, let your body adjust.* But the moment was so important to Mairin that she wanted to mark it somehow.

“For heaven’s sake.” Sapphire put her hands around Mairin’s waist and pushed her up.

Mairin swam away from her grasp. “I’ll do it myself. Give me a minute.” She held her aunt’s pearl necklace. *This had better work.*

She pressed against the barrier and her hand slid through. Carefully, she stuck her finger all the way above-sea and waited for what would happen. It didn’t feel any different, so she put her whole hand out. Something tickled her, and she pulled her hand back in and looked at it. There was nothing on her skin. She stuck her hand out of the water again and felt the same sensation.

The wind. It must have been the wind that the elders talked about. In a heartbeat, Mairin darted out of the water head first. *I’m free!*

A flash of light and instantly, she was blinded. She dove back into the water in a panic. She opened her eyes and let the salt water soothe the burning sensation. This was the cost she paid for going above-sea?

Blindness? But she had permission. She had the pearl necklace. “What was that?” Mairin said. “What did I do wrong? I didn’t even get a chance to breathe air.”

Sapphire held on to her while shapes blurred back into view, gradually coming into focus until her eyesight was restored.

“Nothing, child. You have to adjust to the light and dry air above-sea.

Keep your eyelids closed until it doesn’t hurt. Take it slowly.”

“I thought the breathing part was going to hurt. Miss Pearl needs to add more about sunlight to her lessons.” Miss Pearl had taught that the sun was

bright, but Mairin hadn't expected the sunlight to be blinding. She'd never felt physically helpless like that, and she didn't like the feeling.

"I'm sure she's forgotten. Try again."

This time, Mairin surfaced with her eyes closed. The wind blew into her face, and she took her first breath of air. Such a strange sensation and so different from water. She breathed deeply, pulling air into her lungs and feeling them expand until they were full.

Her attention shifted to the smells. There was the scent of seaweed and salt and something sharp coming from the ships. The word *coal* came to mind.

She bobbed up and down above-sea with her eyes closed until she felt used to the light. As a test, she peered out carefully with her lids mere slits until that little bit of light didn't burn her eyes. Finally, she opened her eyes wide.

Her gaze traveled up the side of the ship, from the enormous black hull up to several white levels on top where four buff-colored funnels stood at attention. It was more mountain than ship. *So that's what ships look like before bacteria feast on them.* Solid and clean-looking.

And then a scent floated over the water from the docks that made her mouth water. *Curious*.

She rounded the side of the ship and swam closer to shore where the people gathered around a small cart. A man wearing an apron was handing out wrapped packages for the people to eat. Steam rose from his cart, and he called, "Fish 'n' chips! Fish 'n' chips pipin' hot."

She'd heard that humans ate some things from the sea. And because of Miss Pearl, she wasn't ignorant of other curious items like umbrellas and gloves. There weren't any umbrellas to be seen, but she noticed several ladies with covered hands.

Where to look next? She wanted to see everything all at once. It was all as Miss Pearl had said. Only, the colors were more vibrant, the sounds, more

confusing, the smells… Oh, Pearl didn't quite explain the smells.

Those she would have to parse out on her own.

Aunt Sapphire's voice came through the water. "Get yourself back undersea." She sounded exactly like the queen, and Mairin dove back down without hesitation.

"All right. Let's talk about surfacing. You don't swim out in the open gawking at the people. They'll see you." Sapphire swam underneath the closest dock.

"I know that," Mairin said under her breath as she followed through the water.

"They've been loading the ship all morning. Look. See those porters there? They've got the changes of clothes for the passengers in those steamer trunks." Men in white uniforms carried trunks up a ramp, while passengers on the ship watched from the decks above. She continued. "This is terrible timing for the prince to decide to sail, when the finfolk are being aggressive. He's gone on and off the ship several times already, but I suspect now he's going to stay on. The first time any of his kin have sailed since his ancestor fell into the sea, leading to the fall of my sister. You'll have to stay with the ship until I get back. Be careful when the motor starts up. Watch you stay away from the propellers."

Mairin floated like a crocodile, her head barely out of the water so she could study the people.

"Which one is he?" The men wore pants, and the women wore skirts that resembled wide tails. Mairin thought the women's clothing was quite pretty. She was especially drawn to the hats the women wore, as now she could see a use for them—instant shade wherever one went. A hat made sense in the sun, but useless in the sea.

"I can't stay here waiting for him to come out on deck. We've marked him. You'll know when you see him."

Sapphire’s comment reminded Mairin she was supposed to be watching the men. It didn’t matter which style of women’s dress she liked best when she had yet to find the prince.

“And then what do I do after I find him?”

“Keep him safe if he falls into the water.”

Mairin shook her head. “That’s really it? I thought you’d have more for me. Seems like such a small thing.”

Sapphire’s lips formed a line. “Yes. This is exactly what you need to do, and nothing more. Now, are we done? I need to join my sisters.”

CHAPTER 6

Sapphire swam away, her dark tail tinged in gold, getting smaller and smaller until it was swallowed up in the sea. Mairin was truly alone again, left with the fish scavenging in the water and the seagulls squawking in the air.

She wondered how far Zale had followed before turning home. He would tell Kai, and Kai would ask their mother what was going on. She hoped her mother wouldn't explain. For once, it would be nice if she knew something her brother didn't.

She hovered below the surface the way Sapphire had shown her, letting the waves wash over her hair like she was floating seaweed. The humans kept busy scurrying on and off the ship. Boxes and trunks piled up near the land's edge, and a tall, tall crane hauled them over the water. Flower bouquets by the dozens were carried onto the ship. A small yellow flower, a rose perhaps, snapped off when two stewards squeezed past each other, and it fell over the rail.

The flower landed out in the open near Mairin and floated on the surface, its dainty petals pointing up to the clouds. Mairin's hands itched to grab it, but it was too close to the gangway. There was a clang of metal as a crane shifted, and Mairin darted out and flipped underwater with the flower, leaving the tiniest of splashes behind, like a fish jumping for a fly. She

surfaced under the dock to examine her prize. Water beaded off the petals and Mairin took a deep sniff. Perfume. That's the word Aunt Pearl had used.

That sweet, indescribable smell was called perfume. Hoping to get more, Mairin tucked this one behind her ear and returned to her post.

Three gangways stretched from ship to shore, and Mairin watched all three. The people boarding at each dressed differently, from plain clothing with simple hats to lacy layers and plumed hats. But no matter which gangway

they used, the people wrapped their arms around the folks on shore, and then boarded the ship in smaller groupings.

Mairin swam closer so she could hear them better. Why ever were these humans getting on this ship?

“We’re so lucky they had room for us,” said a young woman who hung on the arm of a young man.

“Only the best for our honeymoon.”

Following behind them was an older man in a bowler hat. “What a ripping ship!” he said to no one in particular. He paused on the dock as he stroked his mustache.

“It’s the biggest I’ve ever seen,” a woman answered him. She held a dog in her arms and Mairin rose out of the water to get a better look. A dog! One of the human’s little pets. She’d not expected to see one on her first adventure above-sea. She rose higher to get a better look. Aunt Pearl said dogs were the most interesting of creatures. Some would bark at you, but others would want to come up to you with their tails wagging. That’s how you knew they liked you.

Mairin sank back into the water as the woman boarded.

“Yes, ma’am. They say God himself could not sink this ship.”

Hubris. These humans would think differently if they could see all the shipwrecks rotting on the seafloor. Mairin shook her head. No, there was no way she’d end up falling for a human like the Little Mermaid did. These

humans were vainglorious creatures. She would never align herself with one.

A woman’s voice caught Mairin’s attention, and she swam in closer. A young woman sang an aria while surrounded by mounds of luggage—

trunks and hat boxes and handbags galore. Her vocalizing wasn’t bad. Not as captivating as the mermaids’ singing, but, as Mairin recently learned, the

mermaids were given a special gift of voice. The woman then switched tunes and sang with greater feeling:

Let me call you "Sweetheart," I'm in love with you Let me hear you whisper that you love me too Keep the love-light glowing in your eyes so true Let me call you "Sweetheart," I'm in love with you

"Cecily, please hurry. You can practice on board."

"I'm acclimatizing to the sea air, Charles. My lungs need to breathe in the salty air, so when I sing for the captain I won't wobble." She adjusted the wide-brimmed hat she wore and tugged on her short white gloves.

Mairin stared at the girl's hands, wondering about the purpose of the gloves. Miss Pearl said they were for fashion, to help lure a man with mystery. But the young woman didn't seem to be trying to lure in this Charles fellow. The looks she gave him showed irritation.

"For one, you've never wobbled in your life," Charles said. "For two, you don't sing until we're in open sea. Your lungs will have adjusted by then while you stay sequestered in your cabin, *away* from the sea air.

Doctor's orders." He took hold of her elbow and pulled her along. "Now come with me. They'll see to your luggage."

"Not so rough." She pulled her elbow out of his grasp. "I should quit.

Then you'll appreciate what you have in me."

"What? Threatening again? I'd like to see the day you give up on all the attention showered on you. You love the limelight too much to quit, honey."

Mairin sucked in her lip. *Ooo,* what a thing to say to a woman. If human females were anything like mermaids, that man was in for a rough time.

The girl sang an aria at him in response.

In solidarity, Mairin picked up the tune and sang along. The girl instantly stopped and Mairin, sensing she'd attracted the human's attention, ducked

undersea.

Leaving the couple to their argument, Mairin swam to the other side of the ship to see if she could find her human over there. She stopped herself.

Not *her* human. The human whose fault it was that her generation remained barred from complete freedom. Nahla was right; Mairin was bitter. But that didn't mean she wouldn't save the fool if he ended up in the water.

So many humans to search through. Could it be that every human on land planned to sail on this grand ship? The total mermaid population was so few compared to those gathered at the shoreline today.

Where is my human?

The males all looked the same to her. They wore bowler hats and long gray or black overcoats. If they were trying to be unique, they wore brown.

She couldn't imagine falling in love with one of these creatures to the extent that she would give up her home. Her ability to live undersea. Her powerful tail in exchange for two more appendages? What had the Little Mermaid been thinking?

"Your aunt wanted more," Pearl had explained. "She wanted an eternal soul like the humans. It fascinated her. When offered something too good to be true, she didn't think it through."

"I thought she fell in love?" Neme had asked. She liked to hear the story of the Little Mermaid more than Mairin did. Perhaps because it annoyed Mairin to talk about it.

"Yes, she was a romantic, and that extended to all parts of her life. She risked it all to be human. To be with the prince was what they call icing on the cake." Aunt Pearl sighed. "What is love, young mermaids? It's not love when you have to change everything about yourself for the other person."

Mairin snapped out of her daydream when an unusual young man stepped up to the gangplank. She couldn't take her eyes off him—his whole being

glowed as if he was surrounded by bio-luminescent bacteria. *That must be him.*

She ducked underwater to clean her eyes in case the dryness caused the aura. When she popped back up, he was gone. He had been wearing a long coat and trousers, like all the others, and held a hat in his hand. His brown hair had shone because of the aura. From this distance, she couldn't tell his age or his features.

Good thing the mermaids had marked him somehow. Had her mother done that? The Little Mermaid? So many questions. Just wait until she was home again. She and her mother were going to have a very long talk about the kingdom, their royal responsibilities, and their special abilities.

Mairin swam along the length of the *Titanic* and around the other side, but the man wasn't among those leaning over the rails waving at everyone on land. How was she to monitor him if she couldn't see him?

There he was again. She saw a bobbing, glowing hat work its way through the crowd and up the stairs to another level where fewer people were. Good. He didn't seem to appreciate the crowds. That would help. And just in time, too. The sailors suddenly began untying ropes that held the ship in place. The engines rumbled louder. People rushed to the rails waving their final goodbyes to the people on land waving back.

Mairin stuck her hand out of the water and gave a little wave at the land.

No one on land noticed her, as they were all so fixed on the giant ship and the fancily dressed people getting ready to leave. Everyone except one small human girl who locked eyes with Mairin. The wee thing wore a thick

cream-colored coat with a smart little cap covering her head of curls. *Oop.*

Mairin ducked below water, then feeling wild, she flipped her tail up out of the water. She wanted to reward the small human for seeing her. Mairin may be annoyed at the prince and his family for keeping her undersea, but she had no issue with this small wonder of a child. Baby mermaids were

somewhat of a rarity, and therefore cherished and doted upon. She couldn't help but feel kindly toward this little human.

When Mairin popped back out of the water, the girl rubbed her eyes and then stared at the spot where Mairin had been. Someone pulled the girl toward the gangplank, but she kept her gaze on the water. *Good. Be curious about the sea, child. There is more there than you know.*

A horn blasted three times, startling Mairin. She ducked undersea to quiet the noise. Then the hull pulled away from the dock. Six of the smaller tugs slowly pulled the *Titanic* out of port.

Eagerly, Mairin followed behind as they left the dock and all the ships moored there. They moved so slowly that Mairin realized she'd have plenty of time to explore life above-sea and keep an eye out for her human tumbling into the ocean.

Then the water began churning, and a loud rushing filled her ears.

Before she could regain her bearings, she was sent tumbling head over tail by a powerful current. She swam hard away from the pull, realizing it was the force from the propellers. Getting too close to the back end of the ship was one lesson she didn't need to learn twice. The ship traveled slowly, but it moved a lot of water to do so.

There were several loud *pop, pop, pop* s as ropes snapped and slapped the surface. Soon, shouts of "Look out!" rang through the air. "The *New York*'s come loose."

Mairin tried to see the problem and noticed another ship had swung loose from its moorings and headed for a collision with the giant ship.

Sailors scrambled on both vessels, and a smaller tug jumped into action.

It's going to hit. Mairin dove undersea and swam for the vessel. She wasn't strong enough to move the *Titanic*, but maybe she could push the other ship just enough. She put both hands on the hull and pushed, swimming with all her might. When her tail brushed against the *Titanic*, she let go and zipped

out of harm’s way. The rope from the tug kept pulling the smaller vessel, and soon the *Titanic* steamed ahead of the danger.

People looking over the rails murmured amongst themselves. One fellow had a camera—a camera! Miss Pearl’s latest book talked about these.

Mairin’s human stood near him, quickly writing on a notepad.

How exciting life was above-sea. Everything Pearl had taught her was real. If Mairin did a good job watching over their human, maybe she could be added to the sisterhood. She could go above-sea whenever she wanted and watch all these wonderful sights. Humming a tune, she followed closely behind the *Titanic* as it left the harbor.

CHAPTER 7

M airin swam protectively alongside the ship, keeping out of sight and away from the flock of seagulls following behind.

The ship had dispensed food scraps out the back, and the birds trailed along, hoping for more.

After leaving the bustling port, they sailed along natural shores, past more vessels which tooted when they passed. Every so often Mairin popped up above the surface, marveling each time over her freedom. She thought back to when Aunt Pearl started holding extra discussions for those who wanted to learn about above-sea lore. “You ought not to be ignorant of above-sea,” she said. “What if our situation changes?”

Now Mairin realized Pearl was referring to this. To access for all merpeople to the above-sea. It made her even more thankful to the elder mermaids who taught her, despite her own mother’s silence on the matter.

For teaching her the words to think *meadow* and *house* and *rope*. For Miss Pearl’s precious collection of books, some of which had drawings of these things in them.

The above-sea world was fascinating, and once again she was angry that her generation had been barred from surfacing and getting to enjoy all that the previous generations of mermaids had seen.

Her friends had never outright blamed her for their confinement, but there were whispers that stopped whenever she swam up to a group. She knew they talked about the Little Mermaid in a bad way.

Mairin said mean things about her aunt, too. She often led the charge to let everyone know she also blamed her aunt and was angry about their confinement. But even then, her friends felt the need to quiet their talk when she swam by and not include her in their private discussions.

While Mairin was checking out the ship, there was a quick swish of the current against the prevailing flow. The movement startled Mairin, and she looked to see if Sapphire had returned. When she glimpsed a blue tail swirl around the front of the ship, she thought maybe it was Kai sent to keep an eye on her. All this time she'd been suspicious it was Zale following her.

Her mother didn't think she could handle this simple job alone?

Swim, little mermaid, swim away!

A female voice spoke urgently, as if right by her ear. Mairin glanced up at the ship, fearing she'd been seen, but she swam so close to the hull that no one could see her unless they were hanging over the railing. Mairin considered her options, wondering if she should hide. If Kai couldn't find her, he couldn't spy on her or send her home. She stopped that thought. No, what she needed to do was prove her maturity. That meant not shying away from difficult conversations. She would stand her ground and refuse to be relieved of her duty until one of the aunts came.

She swam underwater to meet him, but stopped short when she realized it wasn't Kai in front of her. This creature was similar to a merman, but the elongated fins along his back set him apart. Larger, wilder, and in seconds he was upon her. He stared at her, his eyes dark and fathomless. His only adornment was a shell tied around his neck.

She knew at once what he was. A finman from the north. He might be the same finman that Sapphire had chased out of port. What did he want?

And how did Sapphire chase him off before? Mairin couldn't help but think

of Aunt Pearl and what the finfolk did to her. She'd frozen in shock, but Nahla's reminder kicked her brain into gear. "You're faster than they are."

But before she could react, he bowed before her, making her wonder why he was deferring to her royalty.

"Moab, I presume. Leave me. I've nothing to do with you." Aunt Pearl had cautioned her that when confronted by an enemy, don't lock up, but be firm

and commanding. Use your voice so you don't freeze. Keep moving.

"I've every right to be here, same as you little mermaid. It's a large ocean. Big enough for a ship like this." He looked long and hard at the hull of the *Titanic*. "Wonder what the blue whales are going to think of this." He tapped the side of the moving vessel.

Mairin gritted her teeth. *What did he want with me?* She was a fast swimmer, but after a quick glance at his thick arms and long tail, she knew he was, too.

Suddenly the water felt uncomfortably cold, a unique sensation to Mairin. She'd never been bothered by temperature changes before. The other fish who had been swimming nearby had all vanished, leaving her alone with the finman. She had to tread carefully, but purposefully.

"You finfolk are holding my kingdom hostage. Someone in your ranks badly wounded a friend of mine. What do you want from us?"

"Blunt. I like that. Yes, your kingdom is being held hostage, but not by us. What we want is to talk to you, princess. You can be the key to freeing your kingdom. To freeing us all."

His words were oily and slippery, like an eel sliding out of a tight spot.

Mairin was immediately wary. "What do you mean?"

"Don't be afraid, mermaid. I simply carry a message from the sea witch."

Mairin's eyes widened. She would rather face a shiver of sharks than the sea witch.

"Is-isn't she banished on her floating island?"

He ignored her question. "I know why you're here," he said, "so close to *our* territory that you ought to show more respect. I can help. In fact, I can make life better for you. For all of us."

“Tell me exactly what you mean.” He didn’t sound like he was about to attack her, and finfolk preferred to lure humans, anyway. They weren’t known for their convincing speech, rather their sneak attacks. This one had revealed himself when he didn’t need to.

“I have a potion that will give you legs. You can use it to follow the human you seek above-sea.”

She scoffed. “I’m not interested.” Even the finfolk thought she was like her aunt.

“*Ah*, do not dismiss the sea witch so easily. You and you alone have the power to break our curse.” His face twisted into a sneer. “You can go above-sea and fix what the Little Mermaid did.”

Mairin’s face grew warm. He’d touched a nerve. “You’re talking nonsense.”

“Am I? Haven’t you been confined to below-sea all your life? Today, did you not learn that the boundary isn’t for everyone? That your aunts have been regularly surfacing all this time?”

Mairin continued swimming with the ship, not willing to let the finman sway her, but he wasn’t wrong about what she’d recently learned.

“All of us have hundreds of years left to be trapped below-sea, but if you make the human fall in love with you, the circle will be complete: a sea princess loves a man and is rejected, a man loves a sea princess and is rejected. All is equal. We, including you mermaids, will be free to surface again. It was the deal your grandfather, the sea king made with the sea witch, but your mother is unwilling to risk losing another mermaid to make it end.” He splayed his hands, looking up at the glowing surface above them. “So, underwater we all stay.”

Was it possible? If she did this one thing she could free everyone?

Neme, Miss Pearl, Zale, Kai, and all the merpeople who have never been able to surface. Her heart beat fast with the idea. Her mother might not have

wanted to take the risk, but she'd never asked Mairin. Another hidden secret.

The finman watched her reaction closely.

Mairin cocked her head. She couldn't trust a finman, especially one Sapphire had warned her about. "Why does the sea witch care about what happens to us?"

"She doesn't. She cares about the finfolk. We can't go above-sea either."

He held his hand over his heart. "I don't want us at war, but my people are angry at your people and they're getting restless. You and I want the same thing. Imagine my surprise when one of my scouts saw you, the next generation of the royal family, making your way along the coast."

"You know who I am?" She narrowed her eyes at him the way her mother did when she was suspicious.

He twisted his lips while raising his eyebrows. "We've been waiting for you, princess. Talk is that you have courage; that you're more daring than the rest of your family. And most important, that you have a certain disdain for the humans, so you won't feel sorry for doing what must be done to secure freedom for all the seafolk."

Mairin was taken aback. How could he presume to know anything about her? She didn't necessarily disdain the humans. She was simply disgusted with her aunt for falling in love with one and angry that they all had to pay the price. Although, as she'd just learned, not everyone was confined to living undersea. Her mother had just given her the power to go above-sea.

Should she care that so few were allowed the privilege now that she had it?

"If not you, who else? The merqueen? A future daughter of yours? You would so easily shove off your responsibility onto someone else? You have

the power to stop the attacks on your kingdom and free the merpeople, and yet you hesitate. Maybe you weren't the sea princess I thought you were."

He taunted her, but what he said also resonated. She'd been looking for a way past the barrier for months.

"*If*, I agreed. What do I need to do?" The words were out of her mouth before she thought them through.

The finman smiled.

No! Little mermaid, it's a trick.

Again, Mairin heard the voice close to her ear. She slowly looked around, trying not to startle the source of the small voice. But everything living in the water had left when the finman appeared.

"You need to learn the siren arts to make a man fall in love. Or, you could try what the finwives do and kidnap the human. That's harder to do out here on the sea, though. Normally, your folk are too kindhearted toward the humans, but do your best to entice him. Smile and make your eyes twinkle, that sort of thing. It wouldn't hurt to laugh at everything the prince-child says and swing your hips when you walk."

Mairin started to protest again, but it was obvious he wasn't listening.

Kindhearted was the last word Mairin would use to describe the queen.

Miss Pearl, yes, and she was the one who the finfolk targeted. Pearl was so kindhearted she wouldn't have been able to defend herself. Nahla was efficient. Aunt Sapphire, focused.

The great ship turned, and Mairin realized it was getting ready to stop.

They were close to land again, and she immediately saw that the large ship couldn't sail all the way in. She shot up to the surface to find her prince. As far as she could tell, none of the people had fallen into the water. Already, she'd been distracted from her responsibility.

The finman surfaced with her.

"I thought you said you couldn'—"

“We can surface one at a time.” He held up the round shark-eye shell that hung around his neck. “It’s the sea witch’s. Her most treasured possession. I reveal our secret to prove we want the same thing.”

Mairin listened with interest, still buying time, keeping the finman from attacking her. She needed to think about what he was telling her. Could it be true? Could she complete this so-called circle and free her people once and for all? Could she make amends to her kingdom for what the Little Mermaid had done?

“*If* I do this, how will it work?”

“This is Cherbourg. Some humans may get off the ship, but this is mainly a stop to pick up more of them and their trunks. So many trunks.

What do they do with it all?”

She glanced to the shore and back at the ship again.

The finman laughed. “They’re not going to swim, if that’s what you’re thinking. They bring out the smaller ships and transfer everything right here on the water. I’m all for giving credit where it’s due. The whole thing is rather clever and interesting to watch.” His smile faded, and he grew serious. “While they’re distracted, this is your opportunity to get on the *Titanic.* Simply climb on board the smaller tender and then follow them all on.”

Mairin stared at him. “With my tail?”

“Watch this.” With that, he submerged.

Mairin ducked undersea and observed as he swam away and around the ship. *Now what?* She surfaced and scanned the edge of the boat for the glow of her human.

The finman popped up beside her, grinning once again. “Look.” He pointed at a pair of feet sticking out of the water. He wiggled his toes.

Mairin gasped. *They really are shape-shifters.* She gave him a dubious look. It was one thing to breathe air, but another to walk on land. “Is it temporary? I’m partial to my tail.”

“Don’t worry. You won’t become one of them. Your aunt learned that the hard way.”

Mairin frowned. She didn’t like how he disparaged her aunt, even if she agreed with him. “You can teach me?” Not that she had ever desired legs, but a human form would be necessary to get on the ship. She’d been kept from so much that she was willing to consider all opportunities.

He laughed derisively. “No. This isn’t something you can learn. But with help from the sea witch, you, too, can have legs.” He dove, kicking funny feet above the waves.

When he surfaced again, she shook her head. “I won’t take help from her.”

He pulled out a knobby cerith shell from inside the larger shell fastened at his neck. “Drink this down. Once you’ve transformed, you’ll need to seek out water to maintain your strength. Don’t let yourself become too weak or you’ll be no good to anyone. In case you haven’t noticed, it’s dry above-sea.”

Mairin didn’t take it.

“Is it going to hurt?”

“Nah.”

“How long will it last?”

“Long enough.”

Comforting.

“*If* I do this—try to free us—how will I know when I’m successful?”

“I suspect the sea will become filled with seafolk surfacing and celebrating their freedom. We will all forget what the Little Mermaid did and remember your name instead as our liberator.”

He was only trying to flatter her, but what he said was tempting. Mairin tried to think of any negative consequences. Why hadn’t her mother tried to break the curse? Why did she continue to protect the prince’s heirs if all the mermaids had to do was make one of his descendants fall in love with a

mermaid? Did the queen think a mermaid could not resist a human male’s advances? Were their males so irresistible that a sea princess would risk her very life in the attempt?

“I won’t trade you anything,” she said, in case that was where he was going next.

“I want nothing from you, princess, except for you to complete the circle and free us all.”

“But I want you to promise me that you will keep the sea witch from attacking our kingdom.”

“Done.” He started to hand her the shell, but pulled back. “Oh, and one more item of note, princess. If you attempt to close the circle and fail, you agree to the consequences.”

Mairin set her lips firm. This was what she was waiting for. “Which are?”

“Death.”

Mairin’s eyes grew wide.

“Don’t look so scared. Death to the human. The sea witch is impatient, but I’d rather work with the merpeople and see this done smoother. How would the people up there say it, more humane? This way, you have a chance to save him. If not, he dies, and we’re all free. It was the provision the sea witch put into the peace contract with your grandfather, and it’s time we collect.”

Mairin wished she knew more about this contract. She was at a disadvantage, the finman knowing more than she did. “If the human dies, the barrier opens? This was the sea witch’s contribution to the peace treaty?” Why did her grandfather agree to that?

“A natural death, princess. We can’t touch him. But you know how dangerous the sea is.”

Now Mairin understood. That’s why the sisterhood was protecting the prince from the sea. She didn’t like how the finman phrased things, but if

the alternative was for the prince to die, then she’d be helping the human, too, which is what she’d been sent to do.

She couldn’t believe she was considering doing the thing she said she’d never do, never seek out. Of course, she’d wondered what it would be like to have legs and why her aunt wanted them so badly. What did her aunt know about the human soul that Mairin didn’t that would make her take such a terrible risk?

Mairin had never understood why her aunt wanted to be something she wasn’t. Her aunt’s actions were foolish and selfish and caused the entire kingdom to be punished. Mairin had seen enough amazing sights in the last few hours to know that she had to rescue her fellow merpeople, those who’d never gotten a chance to be free like this. She didn’t want to be human—she wanted to be free. She wanted everyone to be free.

“All right, I’ll do it.”

The finman pressed the shell into her hands. “The tenders are on their way. I’ll go make preparations for you. You’ll need to look like them if you’re going to get on board. This is your chance, princess. Free your people. Free all of us.”

CHAPTER 8

M airin clasped the shell between her hands for several moments, watching the water lap against her tail as she floated on her back. As the sun fell lower in the sky, her scales shimmered in a way they didn't down below-sea. Their iridescence changed from pink to blue to white depending on how she angled her tail.

Mairin uncapped the bottle and wrinkled her nose. Oh, that was vile.

She held it out at arm's length.

One gulp. Quick and easy before she talked herself out of it. She put it to her lips when the finman returned and put his hand on the bottle. "Not here. You'd drown before you got on board. Follow me. I've got everything you need stashed at the back of the tender, but we should hurry before anyone notices."

She followed the finman as he swam toward two good-sized vessels steaming their way to the ship. The tenders matched the look of the *Titanic,* made from the same materials and painted in matching colors, black hull, white decks, and buff-colored funnel. The people on board gazed forward, seemingly awestruck by *Titanic*. Mairin looked behind and noticed how the lights flickered to life on the great ship as the sun's rays dimmed.

The finman broke into her thoughts. "Apparently, the people are pleased with themselves. This will work to our advantage. No one is looking at the

water as they only have eyes for the new ship. It's her maiden voyage. Do you know what that means, princess? It's her first time. Just like yours.

Now, try to keep up."

The finman had already gone up and over the side of the tender *Nomadic* by the time she got there.

Mairin bobbed in the water, unsure about what to do next. She couldn't just flop on board, her tail glistening for all to see. While she waited, there was that feeling again, like she was being followed. She looked out over the vast ocean. Was there another finman in the water? Maybe it was a good idea after all that she was getting on board the ship. These waters had a different feel to her own friendly kingdom, and she didn't like it.

"Mairin?" It was a male voice calling her this time. "Where are you?"

Zale? It was *him following me.*

The finman, now wearing a sailor's flat cap and dark navy jersey, dropped a large canvas bag over the side attached to a rope. "Drink up and climb in. I'll pull you up out of the water. Hurry, the deck is clear."

She held the shell to her lips and dumped the contents down her throat all at once. She immediately gagged, bending forward as she choked on the burning, bitter liquid.

That was worse than the time Zale and Kai tricked her into tasting squid ink.

At first there was no reaction, and she floated, wiggling her tail as she waited, watching for any signs of legs. "When—?"

A burning sensation tore through her beautiful tail. She squeezed her eyes tight against the pain. The finman lied. He was trying to kill her, not help her. She was going to die. Of all the foolish—she rolled over and vomited into the sea.

She dove deeper under the cool waves, trying to quench the heat. She kicked, but her tail didn't respond. She tried to breathe water, but instead of relief, the water gave her a desperate need to surface. She broke through the

water and instinctively took a deep breath. The air brought relief to the burning sensation in her lungs.

"Problem, mermaid?" The finman leaned over the side.

“What did you do?” she gasped the words out, letting the last of the air out of her lungs.

“You have to breathe air, now,” he said, annoyed.

“You tricked me,” she gasped.

“No, I didn’t. You are neither fully human nor fully mermaid. You will fight both environments until the bargain is ended. It was the same way with your aunt.”

“But the pain. It hurts.”

“Grit through it. You’ll get used to the feeling once you’re on land and your legs dry off.” He had no sympathy. “I thought you were as tough as coral.”

She was tough. And her tail was strong. Or it used to be.

“Wait for me,” Zale’s voice was closer. “There were finmen in the area that I had to deal with. I’ll be right there.”

Mairin called out underwater. “No! Stay away. I’m fine.” Zale’s interference was the last thing she needed right now. She couldn’t let him see her like this.

She pulled the bag open and awkwardly wiggled in. She called up to the finman. “Lift me up.” If she got out of the water, Zale would lose contact and not be able to find her.

“All the way in, princess. There’s another tender coming behind this one. I don’t want them to see your pretty head.”

She ducked down, and when the finman pulled her up, the canvas bag cinched over her. *How humiliating.* She realized she’d allowed him to treat her like a fisherman reeling in his catch.

Then, as the water drained out of the bag, the pain intensified as her tail completed its transformation by splitting into legs. She bit her hand to keep

from crying out. She reached down and felt her human legs. Her legs. All her royal scales vanished beneath her touch, leaving her with nothing but soft skin. She felt her torso, her arms, her forehead. All her protective scales were disappearing. Everything that made her a mermaid was going away.

On deck, the finman opened the top of the bag and shoved a lavender colored dress at her. He looked over his shoulder and said, “Everyone is at the front of the boat, watching the approach to *Titanic*, but you can’t trust humans to stay where you want them to. Better put this on, quick.”

The finman had pulled her up behind a pile of the human’s trunks so no one could see her. She struggled to put on the dress which had two rows of buttons and a front panel that was folded in waves. When she pushed her arms through the holes, she watched, fascinated, as even the tiniest of scales on the back of her hands and arms melted into skin. Then she slipped the gown over her torso and covered the last of her transforming body. The pain was excruciating, but at least now no one would see a mermaid.

“Are you done?”

“Yes.” She gasped, looking up from examining the human clothing. The transformation was complete. When she climbed out of the bag, the finman helped her into a thick coat which shielded her somewhat from the chilly wind.

She took a tentative step and pain shot up her entire body. In order to deal with the sensation, she leaned against the railing. Each step was like knives cutting into her body. She paused and squeezed her eyes shut.

Something was wrong. None of these people walked like they were in pain.

What was wrong with her?

“Here, put these on. No one goes around barefoot in this weather.” The finman shoved a pair of lady’s shoes on her feet. He did a terrible job of lacing them, but they were on.

Meanwhile, the tender had pulled up alongside the *Titanic,* where a door on the side of the great ship had already opened near the water. *"Bonjour,*

Nomadic," a sailor called out as he helped secure the two vessels together.

Sailors tossed ropes to one another and then shifted a plank with railings across.

The humans started moving onto the larger ship, but Mairin hung back with the finman.

"What do I do now? There is no way I can take even two steps by myself. I'll never be able to walk onto the ship." And she was freezing. An unpleasant sensation that made her want to curl into a ball to get warm.

Mairin may have looked human in her borrowed dress, but she clearly saw that she didn't fit in with the rest of the passengers queuing up to get on the *Titanic.* Her hair was dripping and the clothing she wore was untidy and damp. These other women were dry, with hair swept up off their necks and tucked in under their elaborate hats. Their dresses were neat and properly adjusted. How was Mairin to blend in with them?

"Oh, just go. They're not that observant." The finman gave her a little push, and she stumbled forward, away from the trunks. She fell, slapping her hands down on the wooden deck. Her new feet were on fire, and her face twisted in pain.

Several stewards turned at the sound of Mairin hitting the deck, and her face burned with embarrassment. Her first time being seen by humans—

other than the little girl—and she was made to look all clumsy.

"Mairin!"

It was Zale. She was surprised she could still hear him outside of the water. He was too late. Even if he found her, he wouldn't be able to break the surface because of the barrier. Still, she bent low on the deck in case he could see her.

“Are you there?” his voice was faint, as if they were finally losing the connection they had in the water.

The finman watched her reaction, then went over to the edge and stared into the water. “Allo?” he called in an accent similar to the sailors. “Is

someone out there?”

Silence. He returned and bent low to help Mairin stand. “Seems you were followed, princess. For your sake, I hope they leave.”

Not likely. Zale wasn’t one for giving up easily.

A steward on board broke off from the others to come Mairin’s way. He called out to her in a language she didn’t recognize.

It was a good thing mermaids were polyglots and picked up on languages quickly. In no time, she’d have a basic understanding. Until then, she would have to draw from all her learning and instincts to survive above-sea.

The finman tipped over a bucket of water he’d found, making it look like Mairin had slipped on the deck. Then he walked away like he had something important to do elsewhere, leaving Mairin all alone to speak with the sailor.

Her heart pounded against her chest. She didn’t trust her voice to speak out. What should she say? How was she going to explain her condition? A human had seen her and was speaking to her.

“That clumsy fool,” the sailor said, this time in English.

She nodded to let him know she agreed.

“I don’t know why he was cleaning the deck while we have passengers.

He must be new. Doubt he’ll keep his job for long. I’m sorry, miss. Let me help you dry off.”

Mairin initially jerked away at the human’s touch. But after he got her upright, she leaned on him as he brought her inside the tender and onto a padded bench near the windows. Dark wood paneling lined the inside of the ship, halfway up the walls, with white paint covering the rest of the walls and the ceiling.

“It’ll take a while for everyone to disembark. If you like, you can catch your breath and warm up here. Did you want a drink from the bar? Some tea? I can send a steward over to help you.”

Mairin shook her head. She kept her gaze lowered to the intricate pattern on the floor. The red tiles outlined in navy, with navy and gold patterns, reminded her of coral.

“I’ll be right back,” he said, with a curious look at her wet hair.

As she gained courage, she examined her surroundings. Lights on the boat made the inside almost as bright as daytime. They made her eyes water. Humans needed so much light.

The steward returned and draped a blanket over her shoulders. “That should help keep the chill out. When you’re ready, head out those doors there, and you can get onto the *Titanic*. Enjoy your trip to New York. *Au revoir*.”

CHAPTER 9

M airin couldn’t believe it. The steward didn’t notice she was a mermaid. If she didn’t hurt so badly, she’d be elated. But this man was distracted with a hundred other things going on. He’d noticed her because she’d been acting so strangely, sprawled out on the floor. That couldn’t happen again. She needed to blend in or none of this would work.

The steward walked away, so confident on his legs. They didn’t seem to hurt him when he took each step. Maybe the pain was something humans got used to. Or maybe the finman was being cruel to her.

A few passengers were still inside, women dressed in heavy furs and men in long wool coats. They talked and drank from teacups while waiting to board the *Titanic*. When they stood up to go, she could try to follow them, but would they let a stumbling woman who could barely walk get on the ship?

“I’ve got evil forebodings, Margaret.” The words came from a short woman with gray hair. Her round face pinched with worry as she stared out the window at the looming ship.

“Why Emma, it’s just nerves. Once we’re off this rocking tender, you’ll feel like you’re on land and your stomach will settle. You’ll see.” The younger woman spoke with an eager smile. She appeared to agree with the

majority of passengers interested in getting a good look at the floating palace.

Emma shook her head. “It’s not my first crossing. I know how I normally feel. I’m never nervous and rarely have *mal de mer*. You didn’t take any of those artifacts out of Egypt, did you?”

“I know you’re joking. The models I’m bringing for the Denver museum are of the ruins of Rome, and my little Egyptian token is for good luck. Nothing is cursed. Quit talking to that newspaperman Mr. Stead. He’ll fill your head with nonsense.”

Another woman said, “Some people are superstitious about maiden voyages. But if it makes you feel better, *Titanic* has already traveled from Belfast to Southampton, and from Southampton to here. Technically, she’s an old hand at travel already.”

The woman named Emma didn’t look impressed at this newcomer’s perspective, and she reluctantly exited the doors to the deck outside.

Meanwhile, the finman, disguised as a steward now, returned with an enormous brimmed hat. “Put this on. It’ll hide your wet hair and help you blend in.”

“That’s great, but what about my legs? I can’t walk.” She looked at the passengers milling about as gracefully on land as mermaids were undersea.

“It’ll never work.”

“What’ll never work is you going back into the water and trying to follow the ship in your altered state. You’d drown by the end of the week.

No choice now, princess. You’ve got to get on that ship.”

She thought of that awful sensation in her chest when she tried to breathe underwater earlier. The finman really was trying to kill her. He arranged it so she had no choice but to continue on the path she’d agreed to.

The thought reminded her of her aunt’s deal with the sea witch, but Mairin wouldn’t let that comparison stand for long. Her aunt had been acting selfishly. Mairin was trying to free her people.

The finman offered his arm for Mairin. “Steady now,” he said. “Think only of the prince and your feet won’t hurt. So I’ve been told.”

Mairin tucked her wet hair up inside the hat. What was she doing? This was all too quick. She needed to study the humans first before she interacted with them.

“I like your hat,” a woman dressed in a thick wool coat commented while her husband walked ahead, leading a dog. This variety sported fur in

various shades of brown and had floppy ears. It kept turning around to look at her.

“Come along, Kitty,” the man said, tapping the animal’s back.

Mairin cocked her head. She was sure that animal was a dog. According to Elder Rush, dogs had snouts, were kept as pets, and liked to retrieve balls. Kitties—

“It’s an Airedale,” the woman said.

“Excuse me?”

“Sorry, it looked as if you were trying to figure out the breed of our dog.”

So, it *was* a dog.

The finman took the opportunity to slink away again, but he didn’t go far. He was keeping an eye on her, making sure she got on the ship.

Mairin smiled, still not trusting her voice. She adjusted the brim to hide her face.

“I bought a similar *chapeau* in Paris,” the woman continued, “and was told it was an original. I guess we both got taken.” She didn’t sound angry, just stating a fact.

Mairin nodded, not quite sure what the woman meant, but uncomfortable with the way the stranger was staring at the hat. *What if it was hers?* Mairin sought out the finman, but he was looking the opposite direction.

When Mairin didn’t comment, the woman kept on. “Where did you get yours?”

Mairin willed the finman to look her way and rescue her. A conversation with a human was too much too soon. She had been prepared to follow a ship and rescue a prince if he fell into the water. She’d not had time to prepare herself to talk with women about dogs and hats, all the while trying to stand on feet that felt like they were being cut by sharp glass. Feeling

faint, Mairin reached out for the nearest bench for support, and the woman took a step back and stopped asking about the hat.

“Mal de mer. Seasickness. They say you’ll get over it a few days in.

Don’t worry. You’ll be fine.” The woman turned away and pressed closer to her husband, who had come back to collect her. In fact, everyone around Mairin took a step away. Whatever this seasickness was, no one wanted to be near it.

The crowd on deck thinned as the inside passengers joined the queue to the gangway. It was time. Mairin needed to move now, or she’d be left behind. Or worse, they’d come for her and ask all sorts of questions about why she didn’t get on the ship with everyone else, why she was wet, and why she was wearing the same hat as the one owned by the woman with the dog.

She took a tentative step and nearly keeled over. The pain had gotten worse, not better. It was as if each step left a fresh wound that she’d walk on again and again. The finman returned to her side. “Follow my lead,” he said. “I’ve seen them do this enough times.”

He practically carried her outside to the deck and the entrance to the small gangway connecting the tender to the ship. The wind bit through the human clothing, making her shiver. Even the other women pulled their coats tighter and huddled together.

“Is it always this cold?” Above-sea was not as comfortable as she thought it might be.

“You’ll be warm once you’re inside.” The finman pulled her forward a few steps. “Concentrate on walking.” The tender pitched as another wave hit hard.

“Sure is choppy,” a man in a bowler hat commented as he reached for the railing.

Mairin was unsure if he was expecting her to respond. Was the human talking to her or to the finman? It would have been nice to have Miss Pearl

along with her. Mairin had noticed that several of the women had traveling companions who were quick to hand over gloves, or adjust hats. If circumstances had been different, Miss Pearl could have been her helper to navigate life above-sea. This finman was gruff and pushy and not sympathetic to her plight at all.

Only a few people in front of them now. Mairin's view turned hazy, and she felt light-headed. She reached for the rail, hunched over.

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me." The finman raised his hands in frustration. "You're seasick?"

Seasickness. She was a mermaid. Who ever heard of a mermaid getting seasick?

As she stood, leaning against the rail, a rogue wave hit the tender causing it to reel. Some salt water splashed up on her, and with the contact to the ocean, she heard Zale's voice call out.

"Stop, Mairin!"

He seemed to be hitting against the undersea barrier with such force that he rocked the water above it. He was going to hurt himself if he didn't stop.

Let alone the humans trying to cross from the *Nomadic* to the *Titanic*. For a brief moment, Mairin thought she saw Zale break the surface and then disappear again. Couldn't be. Her dry eyes must be seeing things.

"Friend of yours?" the finman asked dryly.

When the waves wouldn't stop rolling, the finman let out a burst of air.

"I'll go take care of him. You, when you wake up, go find your prince and

make him fall in love with you. I'll be in touch."

Mairin shook her head. "What do you mean when I wake up?"

He didn’t answer, but did something to the back of her neck. The last thing she heard was him crying out, “This one’s about to faint. Can I get some help here?”

Then everything went black.

CHAPTER 10

M airin woke to soft whispers. A steady mechanical drone.

Bright lights. Had she been dreaming? She'd met Aunt Sapphire, gone above-sea, and been given legs by a finman. What nonsense.

It was the most fantastical dream she'd ever had. She started to roll onto her side, but immediately her stomach felt queasy.

Where was she that it was so bright? She blinked her eyes open and adjusted to the light. White walls. An empty human bed beside her. She ran her hand down her torso to confirm. Yes. Her tail was gone. She had legs.

As she moved, needle pains like those from a puffer fish pricked her new legs. It wasn't a dream.

What have I done?

As unreal as this whole situation was, she had to find the prince, make him fall in love to complete the circle. Her people were counting on her.

She followed the quiet voices through a doorway where there was a woman in a black and white dress and a man with a glow about him. The woman handed the man a glass of water.

"My prince," she whispered. *Water.* Her lips were so dry.

He turned and looked at her, a shy smile breaking across his face.

As she faded out again, her last thought was he was more handsome than she expected. Brown hair. Kind brown eyes. A slight dimple with the

smile.

When she next came aware, she felt the sheet against her skin.

Everything above-sea was so dry, she was able to feel textures more acutely than below-sea. And she was warm. Vaguely, she recalled someone talking about how nice the heater was. She agreed. In the water, the temperatures didn't bother her, but in a humanlike form, she was cold, and the warmth in the air delighted her. A heater might be her favorite thing about the human world.

There were quiet sounds coming from far away, as if she was in a protected space. She peeked out between her eyelashes to see her surroundings. She was still in the plain bed, covered in a white sheet.

Round windows adorned with short green curtains slightly resembling the seaweed curtains in the palace. Outside the portholes it was dark. So sleepy.

She felt for the necklace and clasped it like it was her lifeline. She closed her eyes again.

The next time she woke up, she felt a presence close to her. When she opened her eyes, her heart beat fast, and she startled. Zale sat in a chair that barely fit his large frame. He stared at a pocket watch he held in his hand.

She turned toward him. "Where did you come from?"

He looked up, his forehead wrinkled in concern. "Home. How are you feeling?" He tucked the watch into his trouser pocket.

"What? How?" She scanned the room, looking for danger. There was now another young woman in the bed next to hers and closest to the window. Mairin lowered her voice. "You can't be here. I told you to leave."

He held up his hand, palm out. "First. How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine." She really did feel better. She was no longer woozy and her legs didn't hurt; not that she had tried moving them, yet. "You should go before someone catches you here."

"Catches *me*? What, and you're supposed to be here?"

"I must have fainted and was carried onto the ship."

“Yes, you did. And a good thing, too. They would have wanted to know your name so they could tell you your stateroom number. What would they have done to you then when they realized you aren’t who you’re pretending to be?”

Mairin shrugged. She would have thought of something. “How did you get on? The barrier? Your legs?” She pointedly looked at his lower body. It was so strange to see Zale without his tail. She tried not to giggle at how ridiculous he looked wearing a too-tight black jersey and bell bottom pants that merely hinted at his powerful fins. He also held a sailor’s hat in his hand with WHITE STAR LINE stitched onto it.

He pulled out the pocket watch and held it up.

“My father has one of those.” She realized the significance of the watch.

“He sent you after me? Did you know my mission before I did?”

“The only thing your father said was ‘take this; you might need it to follow Mairin—and don’t lose it. Or her.’ He also said the pocket watch was the queen’s spare. I didn’t even know what he meant. It was the finman who spotted its worth and explained why I was able to break through the barrier. Then I got on from the tender behind yours, pretending to be a sailor like your finman.”

“He’s not my finman.” She was quick to correct him.

“The men needed help loading mail bags, and I just stayed on the ship when the tenders left. Everything is chaotic. It’s a maiden voyage, so they don’t know who is supposed to be here and who isn’t.” He ruffled his wet hair and salty water splattered on her arm. Her parched skin soaked in the salt water, and she tingled as her body responded to the touch from home.

Not Zale. She wasn’t tingling from Zale. She was mad at him.

“And your legs? You skipped over that part.”

“I traded something with the finman, same as you.”

Mairin narrowed her eyes. “I didn’t trade anything.”

Zale cocked his head. “You mean it was your aunt who helped you sprout legs so you could get on this ship?” He raised an eyebrow and crossed his arms.

“Don’t talk to me about legs like I was breaking a rule.” She stared pointedly at his ill-gotten legs.

“After Nahla left, I tried to catch up to you, but you’re faster now than you’ve ever been.”

Mairin grinned at the compliment. “No one was meant to follow me.

My mother had a specific task for me. To do alone.”

His eyes dropped to her legs, which were covered in a blanket to keep her warm. “I highly doubt this was part of the task your mother had for you.”

Her smile faded. “I have a plan.” She continued whispering, “And it’s not what you’re thinking.”

“What am I thinking?” His level gaze met hers.

“The same thing everyone always thinks. That I’ve fallen in love with a human. That I’m going to make the same mistake the Little Mermaid did.”

“Sounds plausible. Why else would you have traded with the finman to look human? *Look* human. You’re still a mermaid. And you ought to be below-sea with the rest of us so we can help save our kingdom.”

“I know I’m still a mermaid.” She stopped talking when the woman in black and white uniform walked by to check on the lady beside her. “And I am trying to save our kingdom. We’ve been lied to. You don’t know what Nahla told me. Why I’m here.”

“No, I don’t. It feels wrong, all of it. I’m getting you out of here.” He stood and tried to pull the sheet away.

Mairin slapped her arms down to hold the covers in place. “I’m not going anywhere. At least, I’m not getting off this ship until I do what I came to do.” She moved her legs and fresh pains shot up her body. She winced.

“They sting, don’t they?”

She bit her lip. “You’re standing. It mustn’t be too bad for you.”

“Oh, no. It hurts. But it’ll only hurt until I can get you back in the sea.”

“Look.” Her whisper grew louder. “You’re not my mother or my father.

You’re not even my brother. You have no authority to tell me what to do.”

Zale’s jaw hardened, then he took a breath. “I’m your friend. And friends help each other. Especially when the other isn’t thinking clearly.”

The door opened and a man all in white—white coat with white hair and matching white mustache entered the room. “Good, you’re awake. I’m Dr.

O’Loughlin. And you are Miss?” He spoke with a brogue, different from the French accent of the sailors on the *Nordic*.

“Mairin.”

“Miss Mairin. Excellent. How are you feeling?” He peered down at her.

“Better.” She glanced at Zale, and so did Dr. O’Loughlin.

“And you are?” he asked.

“I’m here for Mairin.”

Mairin nodded. She might want to get rid of Zale, but she didn’t want to get him in trouble.

The doctor turned back to her. “Can you sit up?”

She nodded, wincing as she slid up to put her back against the pillow, but trying to hide the pain from the human.

“Where does it hurt?” he asked.

“Uh, my legs.” Maybe this was normal in humans, and he would know how to help.

“Do you mind?” he motioned for Zale to move.

Zale moved, but barely. He stood protectively over the bed.

The doctor went down to the bottom of the bed and uncovered her feet.

He gently touched her toes. “Does this hurt?”

She shook her head. Touching didn’t hurt. The sheet covering her legs didn’t hurt. “It’s mostly when I try to stand.”

The man nodded and motioned for her to come off the bed.

She pulled aside the blankets and realized she was now wearing a plain cotton gown instead of the fancy dress. Without looking at Zale, she slid her legs over the edge of the bed, clenching her jaw to keep from crying out.

She sat still for a moment until the pain subsided.

“Do you need a hand?” the doctor asked.

Fortunately, Miss Pearl had taught them colloquial expressions. Mairin knew the doctor wasn’t offering her an extra appendage.

Zale was quick to respond and stepped in front of the doctor. He held out his arms for her to grasp. Mairin gave him a look of gratitude. He could help her fake her way through this examination.

She braced her arms on his and stood on her feet.

“Take a few steps,” the man said.

A few. She leaned on Zale, and he held most of her weight while she moved her feet, pressing against shards of glass with each step.

The man frowned. “This won’t do. Lay back.”

Mairin shook her head in refusal. She’d never get to meet her prince if she spent the entire time in a bed. He was here earlier, she was sure of it.

She needed to get out of this room to find him again. “I’m fine. Really. It’s a condition I’ve had for a while.”

“What condition is that?”

“Some complicated name I can’t remember.” She avoided eye contact with Zale again.

“In all my sixty-three years, I’ve never come across anything like this.”

“It flairs up at the worst times. I’ll manage.” She glanced at her bare feet, expecting to see blood oozing out from the cuts she felt, but they appeared to be perfectly odd little human feet, toes and all. She looked around. “Where are my clothes?”

“The stewardess put them in the drawer there. I’ve got a wheelchair you can use, if that would help. There are several elevators on board to help you get to your stateroom.”

“Oh, yes. That would be fine. Thank you.” She was pretty sure she knew what a wheelchair was given the name.

The doctor motioned for Zale to follow him. “If you notice any change, let me know. She’s otherwise healthy, so there is no reason to keep her here.

There is a form to be filled out. Can you take care of that?”

They were out the door, and Mairin couldn’t hear what story Zale was going to make up about their relationship.

After they left, the woman who had been attending the other patient in the room came over. “Would you like me to help you get dressed?” Her accent was different from the doctor’s. She wore a black dress, a large, tidy white apron, and a little white cloth cap atop her head.

“Yes, thank you.”

“Where are you from?” the woman asked as she helped Mairin out of the bed.

“Far from here,” Mairin answered vaguely.

“Not as far as me, I bet.” The young woman smiled good-naturedly.

“I’m from Australia.”

“Oh, by the Great Barrier Reef.” Mairin had heard of the wonders of the reef.

“Yes, it is lovely, from what I hear. Let me know if you need anything.

The name’s Miss Higgins. I’m a first-class stewardess and also help here in the hospital.”

“Thank you.”

“There are no laundry facilities on board, but I dried and pressed your dress as best I could.” She pulled out the clothes the finman had given her to wear. “We didn’t know your name, so we didn’t know from which room to retrieve new clothes. I can do that now for you, Miss Mairin, if you’d like to wear something else.” She pulled out a folded paper and scanned it with her finger.

“No! Thank you. I’ll be going to my room directly. There’s no need to fuss.”

“I don’t see you on the ship’s passenger list. If you give me your room number, I can send the charge to your room.” She looked up from the paper and retrieved a pen from her pocket.

“My room number?” Mairin could make one up. What numbers would they have for the rooms?

The stewardess waited with the nib of her pen poised over the paper.

Mairin wanted to see the pen on paper, having only been taught about human communication. She and Neme once imitated human writing with sticks in the sand, but the water immediately washed away their efforts.

“Yes?” the stewardess prompted.

Or Mairin could feign ignorance. Did everyone board the ship already knowing their room number? “I haven’t gone there yet, so I don’t know.”

Her voice sounded false, even to her.

“We’ll sort it out. You must have been a last-minute change? There are always adjustments until we’re at the final port of call.”

Meanwhile, the young woman in the bed beside had perked up. She leaned over the edge of the bed as if trying to get closer to the conversation.

Miss Higgins pulled the curtain between them. “I’ll be right with you,” she said to the woman.

After donning the clean dress, Mairin painfully returned to her bed to wait for Zale and the wheelchair. The stewardess quickly pinned up Mairin’s hair and returned the ill-gotten hat to her. Then she opened the curtain and spoke to the woman in the other bed. “How about you? Ready to return to your room?”

“May I stay here the entire trip? My manager doesn’t believe me that I’m too sick to cross the ocean.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere,” Miss Higgins said. “Are you really sick, or do you only want your manager to think you are? If you’re really

sick, you’ll have to change into a hospital gown.”

Mairin recognized the disgruntled singer from the docks at Southampton and sang a little of the song she'd heard.

The young woman in the bed smiled. "Not bad. Did you want my autograph?" She looked around and grabbed the fountain pen Miss Higgins offered her.

"Cecily Davis, I do fear that you are wasting our time." Miss Higgins stood over her with arms crossed.

Autograph was a word Mairin wasn't familiar with. She shook her head.

"No, I just wanted to let you know how much I liked your song."

"That's very sweet of you." She angled her head. "You have a pleasant tone to your voice. Are you a professional singer?"

Mairin shook her head.

"You could be. If you can put up with everyone else telling you what to do and where to go and who to talk to."

Cecily didn't make being a professional singer sound inviting.

Miss Higgins excused herself. "Seems like a counseling session might be best for you," she said to Cecily. "I've got my regular rooms to attend to.

If you ladies don't need anything else, I'm sure the doctor will be back soon to discharge you both."

As soon as the stewardess exited the room, Cecily smiled. "Now that it's the two of us. Tell me. What are you up to? Are you under an assumed name? Did you sneak aboard to be with that handsome sailor?"

CHAPTER 11

T he singer waited for an answer, leaning forward with her chin balanced on her hand.

“What are you talking about?” Mairin’s voice rose defensively.

“You can tell me. I won’t say anything. I enjoy a good gossip like the next girl, but I’m good at keeping secrets, too. I’m under an assumed name, myself. My manager thought it would stir up the press, make them think I’m more famous than I really am.”

In no time, Mairin learned that Cecily had been traveling in Europe, singing in various theaters. During her first stop, she’d met a man, and they’d since fallen in love. She wanted to stay in London to marry him, but her manager had booked a last-minute North American tour for her, without asking. Apparently, another singer had taken ill and canceled multiple stops.

Cecily would be touring for months. “If I had the courage, I would have eloped with him when he asked me to. If I go home to Georgia, my parents will never let me come back. They’ll want Paul to emigrate, but we want to live here, in London.”

“Why don’t you get off the ship?” Mairin asked. Didn’t seem a difficult choice to her. “Looks like you don’t want to disappoint anyone, but you’re forgetting about yourself and this Paul.”

Cecily sat straight up. “It’s not as if my folks won’t like Paul. They’ll love him to pieces when they meet him.” She slapped the bed. “I’m going to do it. We’re stopping in Queenstown, and I can get off the ship there.”

Then Cecily rolled her eyes. “Oh, it’s too complicated. How would I do it?

My manager would know in a moment that I was gone and come after me.

I’ll crumble in a second. There are contracts he agreed to.”

“If you can get to the land, and the ship takes your manager to another port, doesn’t that separate you? That is what you want, since you can’t seem to tell him outright, isn’t it?”

Cecily bit her lip and looked away. “You make it sound so simple.”

“It’s not?” Mairin didn’t understand what she was missing.

“But the contracts…and my parents. It would end my career back home if I drop out of this tour.”

“Do you want to be in North America alone or in London with Paul?”

“I don’t care one whit about a North American tour. I want to marry Paul and have babies. I want a house of our own with a cute little yard where the kids can play.”

Did all humans make everything extra complicated? No wonder the Little Mermaid had such a time with the slow-witted prince.

Cecily hugged her pillow. “Let’s say I do get off at our stop in Queenstown. I could hop the tender and wait in the hotel for Paul to join me. But how do I keep Charles from catching wind and following me? He has a way of persuading me. He reminds me how much I like money, and sometimes I forget how much I love Paul.”

“Don’t let Charles see you leave.”

“You don’t understand managers. They manage you. He knows where I am at all times. I’d have to trick him somehow. Make him think I’m in my stateroom when in reality I’m on my way to Queenstown. And he has to believe it until *Titanic* pulls anchor and is safely away.”

She leaned forward with a gleam in her eye. “Sing for me again.”

“Excuse me?”

“Sing. I want to hear your voice again, your tone. Try to sing like you’re copying me.” Cecily began:

I am dreaming Dear of you, day by day

Dreaming when the skies are blue, When they're gray When the silv'ry moonlight gleams, Still I wander on in dreams

In a land of love, it seems, Just with you

When Cecily got to the chorus, Mairin chimed in, repeating the song she'd heard Cecily sing on land.

Let me call you "Sweetheart," I'm in love with you Let me hear you whisper that you love me too Keep the love-light glowing in your eyes so true Let me call you "Sweetheart," I'm in love with you While Mairin sang, Cecily closed her eyes and a smile slowly spread across her face. "Do me a favor?" she asked. "Take my place in the stateroom. I'm betting you need a room to call your own." She gave Mairin a knowing look. "It's a first-class room with an en suite. I think my parents were suspicious that I didn't want to come home and booked a fancy room to make sure I was on this ship. Miss Higgins is my stewardess, and she seems game to help a girl out. She can keep my manager from coming into my stateroom. Tell him I'm not well or something. If you sing a little the moment I'm getting on the tender, he won't even suspect I'm anywhere else."

"I…don't know what to say." This was not Mairin's mission.

"Say yes," the girl laughed. "I knew I'd met a kindred spirit when I saw you."

"Yes." Mairin laughed along with the singer, whose personality was so much like Neme's. How did this girl get Mairin to do her will so quickly?

These were the techniques of persuasion that she needed to win the heart of the prince so she could free her people.

"It's first class, so you'll have the best of everything. When my manager finally figures it out—and he probably will—just sing for him, and he'll calm down and offer you a contract." Cecily held up a finger, "Only, be careful what you sign."

“I won’t sign a thing,” Mairin said. If nothing else, helping Cecily out would give Mairin a place of her own on the ship.

“You’re the best.” Cecily bounded out of bed and hugged Mairin.

Mairin stiffened. A human was hugging her. She tried to keep an emotional distance, but Cecily had a disarming way about her, and Mairin relaxed. It was as if the human girl had her own kind of magic. When Cecily let go, Mairin put up her personal barrier again. She wasn’t here to make friends or be friendly or come to understand the humans. She was here for freedom and freedom only. She needed to keep that goal at the forefront of her thoughts.

“This ship has a Marconi operator right on board. I’d better get my message in the queue.” The young woman reached out and squeezed Mairin’s hands. “You’re a life saver. It won’t take but a few minutes. Meet me upstairs on C-deck. Room C-81. It’s almost directly above us, across from the maid’s and valet’s saloon.”

Her mal de mer apparently gone, Cecily flew out the door, almost running into Zale pushing the wheelchair.

Zale backed out of the doorway and watched her go. “What was that about?” he asked.

Mairin smiled. “The next step in my plan.” She’d had an entire conversation with a human who didn’t suspect a thing. The finman was right. These humans weren’t very observant. They were too wrapped up in their own problems to notice anything amiss, like a mermaid with legs, breathing above-sea successfully now for hours.

Zale scooted the wheelchair next to the bed. “I don’t like the sound of that. Are you going to fill me in on this plan of yours?”

“No. Is that my new chair?” She looked dubiously at it. It was a wicker chair held up by two large wheels on the side and a third, smaller wheel in the back.

“Sit. I’ll show you how it works.”

“Fine, and then you can go. I’m sure my mother needs everyone back in the kingdom. Everyone who can’t be spared because they are doing other important kingdom work,” she added before Zale could point out that Mairin was far, far outside of the kingdom.

Her legs felt immediate relief when she sat in the chair. *Ah,* this was the way. She reached for the wheels and gripped her soft hands around the rubber. She gave a little push, then a bigger one. Once she was moving, it was easier to rotate the wheels. She wheeled toward the window, hopeful for the first time that she could overcome the pain and carry on with her mission.

“Nice. Now turn around and come back,” Zale said.

Mairin thought for a moment and turned the chair, only bumping into Cecily’s bed with a thump when she swung wide. Not as easy as it looked.

In fact, it was going to take her some time to get used to maneuvering in an empty room, never mind a ship filled with humans.

She awkwardly made her way back to Zale. “Thank you. I’m all set.

You can return home and let the queen know I’m doing well at my task.”

She smiled her best persuasive smile. Zale was not one to back down easily, but neither was she.

Zale narrowed his eyes. “I’m not going anywhere.”

She frowned. “I didn’t think you would. If you’re going to stay, then you have to be my servant. I watched the people boarding the ship, and those staying in first class—like me—have all brought their maids or butlers or chauffeurs with them. You can be my chauffeur and drive me around this

ship. I need to go to C-81.” Mairin pointed up, then set her hands in her lap and waited.

Zale studied her face. Shaking his head, he assumed command of Mairin’s wheelchair. “Whatever’s going on, I hope you know what you’re doing.”

T

Zale to go to the bow, the front of the ship, where they could take a first-class elevator up to C-deck. After several wrong turns and help from a white-jacketed steward, they arrived at the bank of three elevators tucked in behind a dramatic double staircase.

Each elevator was covered by an elaborate ironwork gate except for the one in the middle, which was open. With only a slight hesitation, Zale wheeled her under the arched opening and told the attendant they wanted to go to C-deck. After a curious look at the two of them, the attendant closed the gate. He adjusted a lever and there was a slight lurch as the elevator rose.

The inside was painted white and had mirrors on each wall and a settee along the back. Mairin tried not to gawk at herself in the mirror, but she was shocked to see herself so clearly out of water. The way Miss Higgins had tidied her hair made her look like a proper human now.

Off the elevator they went, and Zale maneuvered around the humans milling about. Finally, down a white corridor of doors, they met up with Cecily, returning from sending her message. Her face flushed with

excitement. “I was looking for an excuse to use the new wireless. Won’t Paul be surprised to get a message sent from sea!”

Mairin held up her hand to stop Zale from questioning anything. Mairin didn’t know what a wireless was either, but she would not risk sounding out of place.

Cecily opened the door to her stateroom and invited them in. “Every detail is perfection. They’ve even used dark walnut for the wainscoting, just like in my hotel in Switzerland.”

Indeed, the room was lined in dark walnut paneling. Immediately to the right was a magnificent bed, also in walnut, with gold-fringed green velvet curtains that were tied to the bed posts. A dusty-rose covering lay over the mattress and made the bed look so much more inviting than the sparse hospital beds.

Cecily opened a wardrobe and pulled out a small bag. “We’ll be in Queenstown by lunch, so we have to get our plan straight.”

A vase filled to overflowing with flowers caught Mairin’s attention.

“These flowers are beautiful. What are they called?” Mairin indicated to Zale to wheel her to the table. The clusters of bell-shaped white flowers grew out of delicate stems and were surrounded by wide green leaves. She reached out and touched one of the waxy flowers.

“Lilies of the valley.” She smiled. “From Paul. How did I ever leave him? I’m glad you talked some sense into me.”

Zale shot Mairin a questioning look. She ignored him and smelled the flowers.

Cecily pointed at a small frame. “That’s his picture beside.”

The man in the image cut a handsome figure with dark, brooding eyes and a solid mustache.

“He’s nice looking,” Mairin said.

“And these are the Easter eggs he gave me on Sunday. I was saving them for the trip for whenever I was craving sugar.” Cecily opened a box to

reveal two white oval shapes decorated with pink, yellow, and green flowers with sugar swirls around the outer edge. She picked one up. “Isn’t it, darling?” Cecily turned the egg, which had a hole cut into it. Inside was a

little girl in a red dress chasing a small dog. Mairin reached for the other egg and saw a garden with a woman reading a book. It was all in miniature.

Amazing. Perhaps she could recreate something like this back home.

Maybe with a clam shell. An Easter clam?

“The young ones back home would love this.” Mairin held up the egg for Zale, but he made a face and looked away.

“There’s one more thing you can do for me,” Cecily said.

Zale rolled his eyes. He was really getting to be bothersome.

“What is it?” Mairin smiled.

Cecily snatched a paper booklet off her bed and flipped through it. “I’ve looked at the passenger list and there are so many people I want to get autographs from: that young actress, Dorothy Gibson, and there’s a director here somewhere.” She pointed down the list. “Edith Rosenbaum, she’s a fashion writer, but I know she’s traveling back with some delicious gowns from Paris. Benjamin Guggenheim, but watch him, he has a reputation. But especially the actress, if you don’t mind.”

There was that word again. *Autograph*.

Cecily dug into a bag and retrieved a small leather book. “This is one of those confession books where people sign their names and then fill out the columns confessing their likes, abominations, madnesses, and so on. Do you think you could gather as many as you can and then mail it back to me?

It’s the only activity I was looking forward to on this ship. All these rich and famous people in one spot, I’d hate to miss out, especially with my mother not here to discourage me from bothering people.”

Now Zale was flinging his hands up into the air. To him, it must sound like a madness, but it was obviously important to Cecily.

“I would be happy to.” Anything to move her along.

Cecily grinned and then wrote her address in the front of the book. “Just carry it with you so you’re always ready.” Then, as an afterthought, she said. “You can sign it, too. With that voice of yours, you might be famous yourself one day.”

Before Zale could react, Mairin pointed to the door. “Zale, why don’t you go outside and be a lookout for her manager, Charles. Knock on the door if you see him coming.”

“Good idea,” Cecily said. “He’s got a thin mustache and rather a baby face. He’ll probably be frowning.”

Zale looked like he was about to protest, so Mairin waved her hand dismissively as she’d seen Cecily do earlier in the hospital.

“If you insist.” Zale’s look displayed his irritation, but he complied, shutting the door behind himself.

“We’ve not much time,” Cecily swooped back to the wardrobe. “Here are my clothes. I’m only taking one change of outfit with me. You can have all of these dresses. Latest fashion, of course. Make sure you change for dinner. And, oh, dear. You’re going to need some pocket money, aren’t you?” Cecily removed most of the contents from a purse before giving it to Mairin. “Treat yourself to the Turkish bath, or go play squash. Try new things for me and enjoy yourself.”

“I will, thank you.”

Cecily’s eyebrows pinched together. “I hope you figure out what you’re looking for on this ship. I know I did.” Her concern slipped back to a smile as she thought about herself again. “I can’t wait to see Paul.” Her hand lingered on a pale peach dress. “My Easter dress I wore to church last. Too fancy for everyday wear, but I have to take it, too. Paul suggested elopement when he saw me in it.”

Mairin keyed in on this piece of information. “Is an Easter dress the secret to getting a proposal? Do you think it’s the color or the look of it?”

The singer was engaged, so she must know a thing or two about getting a man to fall in love.

“Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome out there?” Cecily smiled like she’d uncovered a secret. “Keep doing what you’re doing. From my perspective, if he’s not yours already, he’s well on his way.”

“Oh, him?” Mairin was taken aback. She shook her head. “He’s my brother’s best friend. No, there’s someone else I’d like to attract. What would you do?”

“You’re passing over that fine looking man—who clearly has feelings for you—for someone else? You must be crazy or this other man must be rich.”

Mairin bit the inside of her lip in frustration. “We’re running out of time. Do you have any advice?” How did Cecily turn everything her way so quickly? Cecily was getting everything she wanted, yet Mairin couldn’t even get her to answer simple questions. Humans were infuriating.

Cecily picked up Paul’s photograph. “Used to be, I’d have all kinds of advice for you. But now that I found Paul, I realize you can’t force it. That just leads to your own unhappiness. Simply find a way to let him know you’re interested and see what happens.” Cecily tucked the photograph into her bag. “It’s funny. I’m sneaking off the ship for love, and you’re sneaking onto it for love. I hope it works for us both.”

A small knock on the door indicated Charles had been spotted.

Cecily jumped and then stuffed her traveling bag into the closet. She smoothed her skirt, her hair, and put a smile on her face.

“You’d better go. Meet me on the promenade deck as soon as we drop anchor at Queenstown.”

CHAPTER 12

“I t’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Mairin said to Zale as they moved down the promenade deck. Her beloved water spread as far as the eye could see. She watched the dark, pulsing ocean flow all the way to the horizon. She knew the ocean was big, but to be so far above the surface and see a glimpse of *how* big, well, it took her breath away. “For all the beauty on this ship, our sea is more beautiful than the flowers or the carved wood paneling or the sparkling lights shining in the rooms.”

“If that’s what you think, why’d you leave? What are you doing here?”

Zale slowly pushed her chair, avoiding the humans as much as possible.

He’d changed out of a sailor uniform and into wool pants, a dress shirt, and a long coat so that he looked like the other male passengers.

“No matter how many times you ask, I’ll not tell you. You won’t understand, but believe me when I say that what I’m doing is for all of us.

Our future.”

Mairin tore her gaze away from the water and started looking for the prince. She hadn’t seen her charge since leaving Southampton. These humans were hard to keep track of. “Let’s go onto the other side.”

Most of the people gathered on the side facing the land. As *Titanic* sailed closer to Queenstown, more people came out to watch. Green rolling hills like Miss Pearl described rose up from the shore, and a port town came

into view. *Titanic* stopped short of going into the harbor and two smaller tenders made their way closer. Still no sign of her prince or of Cecily.

Along with the tenders bringing new passengers and mail, up came artisans selling their wares. Several newspaper boys scrambled up the ramp, arms laden with Irish papers. The headline was all about the *Titanic*’s maiden voyage, and people were buying them to read about themselves.

As trunks opened, the deck quickly became an outdoor market. Mairin watched as a woman with a large trunk deftly propped it up on a deck chair.

Dressed all in black with a black straw hat, she pulled out dainty pieces of white material that the women on the ship flocked toward with audible sounds of awe. Mairin was immediately curious.

“Take me over there,” she said to Zale, wagging her finger at the cluster of women.

Zale looked dubiously in their direction. “It’s best we don’t get too close to them.”

“They’re not sharks. They’re not going to bite.”

“Not what I meant.” His voice sounded irritated, but he wheeled her closer, skimming along the side with the railing. He kept her as close to the water as he could, which made her nervous. All it would take from him was one quick motion, and he could toss her back into the sea.

A glow rose above the crowd, and Mairin’s gaze zeroed in on her prince as he approached a man wearing a long, double-breasted jacket with brass buttons. The deep navy-blue color of the man’s wool jacket was so dark that when not in the direct light it looked black. His visored cap sported a badge with a gold leaf design, which made him look official. A friendly, but proud look graced the officer’s face, along with a white beard.

Mairin heard her prince ask, “How is she running, Captain?”

“Oh, splendidly. Not the slightest hitch.”

“As I would expect from the White Star Line.”

The men continued to talk and Mairin stretched her neck to hear them better while Zale began to wheel her away. “What else can we see on board?” he said. “Anything else to satisfy your curiosity before we jump ship?”

Mairin grabbed the wheels herself and awkwardly scooted back over the deck, close to one seller who draped her wares onto some deck chairs

leaning against the wall.

Zale crossed his arms and remained scowling at the rail. No time to worry about his feelings. She had to meet the prince.

“Oh, Mairin!” Cecily flounced up in front of her, cutting off her view of the prince. She stood with her manager at her side, looking bored at the shoppers.

“This is even better,” Cecily whispered in Mairin’s ear as she nodded at the cluster of women surrounding the woman in black. “He hates shopping, and if I dawdle here long enough, he’ll make an excuse to leave.”

Mairin nodded absently as she watched with fascination as woman after woman lifted the white wisps up to the sky as they examined them. Happy exclamations were followed by an exchange of money.

Mairin stared hard at the seller’s wares. Whatever were they for? The woman spoke with a thick Irish accent and explained how each was a piece of lace handmade using different techniques. She had decorative lace for tables, lace collars for shirtwaists, women’s ties, and broaches.

“I know what to do.” Cecily turned and gave Charles a sweet smile and a wave to come over. “I just had a brilliant idea.”

Mairin squirmed as Cecily’s manager dutifully came over.

“Charles, you must meet my dear friend Miss Mairin. I had no idea she’d be on board. Can we make room for her at our table?”

Dear friend!

“Pleased to meet you,” he said with a slight bow of his head. He gave her a cursory glance before focusing back on Cecily.

“Oh, you should be more enthusiastic than that,” Cecily said. “She’s a singer. A fine, undiscovered talent.” Cecily winked. “You’re welcome, darlings.”

Mairin smiled haltingly. What was this human up to? Lies upon half truths and Mairin was fully participating. Ever since Mairin had made the agreement with the finman, it seemed anything was allowed now. She foolishly glanced at Zale, hoping he couldn't hear the exchange. His mouth was set in a thin line, and his eyes seemed to question her sanity.

Charles tossed another glance at Mairin, his gaze looking at the wheelchair and not her eyes. "Cecily is a good judge of talent. Although, we all know singing requires a good deal of stamina and lung power." He directed this last point toward Mairin.

She deepened her smile, her lips feeling stretched tight against her teeth.

He rejected her outright based on her using a wheelchair, and Cecily didn't even seem to notice. Good thing this Charles wasn't her target. She wouldn't have been able to go through with it.

Apparently satisfied, Cecily waved Charles away again. "Don't let us keep you from enjoying the ship. We're going to shop until they pry these shopkeepers from our grasp."

Cecily took hold of Mairin's hand and Mairin had to refrain from automatically jerking it back.

"Fine." Charles looked warily at the sellers. "I did want to investigate the gymnasium."

"Take your time. It's been ages since Mairin and I have seen each other, and we have a lot of catching up to do."

Charles doffed his hat and turned abruptly.

Mairin breathed out in relief. The more time she spent on Cecily's man problem, the less time she had for her own. She looked around for the telltale glow of her prince, but he was gone. The captain walked away, resuming his inspection of the ship.

“We’ve kept Charles busy for now, so if you want to take a quick look at the Irish lace, go ahead. But don’t browse for too long. You should be in my room before the tenders leave again.” Cecily’s face twisted in concern as she looked at Mairin’s wheelchair. “Do your legs work at all? You really should stand sometimes to let him see and think you’re me. Can you do that?”

Mairin bit her retort over Cecily’s bluntness. “It’ll be difficult, but yes.”

“Wonderful,” Cecily said breezily. “Here. Have my hat.” She shoved her wide-brimmed and feathered hat onto Mairin’s lap. “It’s how Charles scans a crowd looking for me. No one else wears hats on board after the first day unless it’s unusually cold outside, so that should help you if you need to carry the charade longer. I’m not sure how he’ll react to my giving you my stateroom.”

Mairin stroked the feather. It looked like a feather boa kelp, the way it softly wound around her fingers. “What’s this?”

“Ostrich. Once he sees you, you can sit back down and cover the hat with a steamer blanket. He’ll rush to the spot, then think he’s just missed me again.” She laughed. “I almost want to stay on board to watch the fun.”

“*Mm hmm.* Fun.” But not Mairin’s assignment. How much of a handful was this Charles going to be? Ensuring a private room in first class might not be worth the hassle. Once Cecily was off the ship, Mairin might let Charles find out. What did she care about Cecily’s personal problems when her kingdom’s freedom lay in the balance?

“Oh, look. It’s Edwin Jespersen.” She waved heartily at the prince walking toward them. “I didn’t see his name on the passenger list, but I’m so happy to see him before I leave.”

How could Mairin have missed his glow singling him out from the other passengers? She sat up straighter and tucked a stray hair away from her face as she prepared to meet her prince.

“Edwin, darling. It’s so good to see you. We must get together later for a card party. Have you met Miss Mairin? Miss Mairin, this is Mr. Edwin Jespersen, star reporter. We’ve been fast friends ever since he introduced me to Paul.” Without allowing them time to say anything to each another, Cecily pressed on. “Are you here to cover the maiden voyage?”

Mairin’s smile faltered. *Star reporter? Could he not know that he’s a prince?* There was no question he was marked by the mermaids.

Mr. Jespersen had opened his mouth to say something to Mairin, but instead smiled at her, his eyes crinkling in the corners. “Yes, I boarded at Southampton and the captain talked me into staying on for the journey rather than getting off here in Queenstown. No one in my family has ever been to America, so I thought I would be the first.”

“Oh, yes, I’ve heard about your family’s aversion to the sea.” Cecily winked conspiratorially at Mairin, and when she did, Mr. Jespersen’s face turned an unusual shade of red.

Was that what Miss Pearl referred to as a blush? What did Cecily say to make him react in embarrassment?

He turned to Mairin and nodded politely. “I’m happy to be introduced.”

“Miss Mairin is traveling on her own, so maybe you could be her protector?”

“I’d be delighted.” When he took a step closer, Zale resumed his place at her side. “May I help you?” he asked, gaze bearing down on Mr.

Jespersen.

Mr. Jespersen turned his attention to Zale. “I’ve just been introduced to Miss Mairin. The name’s Jespersen, Edwin Jespersen.” He held out his hand affably to Zale, who stared at it for a moment before reaching out and shaking. Both men’s hands turned white with the pressure.

“I’m sorry, I must go about my business,” Cecily said. “Mr. Jespersen, be sure to check in with Paul when you get home. He’ll have some news for

you. Be a dear and help Mairin pick out something nice? If I recall, you did a report on Irish lace, once?”

“Yes, I can assist, but it’s really best to choose what you like.”

Cecily bent down to give Mairin a hug. Again, Mairin’s first reaction was to stiffen at a human’s touch. Cecily whispered into her ear, “I can’t have Mr. Jespersen watching me get on the tender, so keep him busy, but remember, don’t take too long to return to the stateroom.” She straightened and gave a little wave. “See you all later.”

Cecily skittered her way across the deck. She’d planned to walk down to the tender along with the sellers returning to land and then step off in Queenstown and into her new life.

Thank you, Cecily. Mairin could only hope her own actions aboard *Titanic* would lead to a new life for herself and her kingdom. Now, to focus on wooing the prince. She smiled winsomely at him.

“We should go, too,” Zale said, taking hold of the handles on her wheelchair and beginning to turn her around.

But Mairin reached out and grabbed the closest sample of lace. “What kind is this?” Mairin asked, holding up a large circle of netted lace to the seller.

The astute woman positioned herself in front of the chair so Zale couldn’t take Mairin away.

“A lovely choice. Carrickmacross lace. A specialty of the Carrickmacross area. Many a family was saved during the Great Famine by this lace. The sisters at the St. Louis Convent teach the technique now.” The woman pointed out the hearts around the outside and the shamrocks inside.

It was a lovely piece, but what would Mairin do with something so frivolous? It would only float away in a strong current. And what would her

mother think if she brought back something from the human world?

“This broach would look pretty on you,” the prince said. He reached over and handed her a lace rose. “If you’re looking for something as a

souvenir.”

Mairin took it, sending a smug smile in Zale’s direction. He had let go of the chair’s handles and was standing inches from the prince, invading his space. Zale really thought she was at risk of falling in love with a human!

While Mairin studied the piece, another woman paid for her purchase and left. A tall man then pulled out several bills to pay for a lace jacket.

Since Mairin didn’t want to reveal that she didn’t know exactly how the money exchange worked, she stalled for time with the prince, her real purpose in being there. How would Cecily keep the man’s attention?

“This is a lovely piece,” she said, complementing the prince on his suggestion.

The lace seller, along with all the other craftswomen, began packing up their wares. “You’ll have to decide soon, miss,” she said. “It’s time we get back on the tender.”

Reluctantly, Mairin handed the broach back to the lace seller. She needed to be in Cecily’s room before the tender left the ship. “Thank you for teaching me about your lace.”

Zale took the comment as a dismissal, and he gripped the handles again, prepared to wheel her away.

“You must have it, I insist.” Mr. Jespersen handed the seller some money, and the lace rose was back in Mairin’s hands.

“Very kind of you,” she said, oddly delighted at the gesture. It was a trinket she had no use for, but it was so pretty and fascinated her.

“You never know if you’ll have another chance at authentic Irish lace. If you really want to thank me, you can join me for dinner tonight.”

Mairin nodded demurely. *Success!* Zale snorted quietly, and she gritted her teeth. “I’d love to,” she added.

“Let’s meet at the Palm Room outside the Café Parisien at seven. Bring Cecily. If I know her, she won’t want to be left out.”

Satisfied she was making progress, Mairin allowed Zale to wheel her away.

“I was standing right there,” said Zale. “Yet he still made plans with you. You don’t find that rude?”

“Why would I think him rude?”

“What if we were married?”

Mairin laughed. “We don’t look married. The clothes you found aren’t in the same class as Cecily’s and mine. Everyone seems to have a uniform of sorts. He probably assumed you work for me.”

Zale grunted. “Since when did you become the expert on human mores?”

Mairin didn’t want to go into all her lessons from Miss Pearl. Zale shouldn’t be questioning her. He shouldn’t even be with her. “We have to get to Cecily’s room before Charles goes looking for her,” she said.

“Not that again. Are you really going to help this human girl? You don’t even know her.”

“But she has left me a room filled with her belongings. It was a good trade. Now take me there so I can freshen up for dinner.” Mairin repeated what she’d heard a young woman say to her companion.

“Oh, for your private meeting with the prince?”

Mairin tried to keep the shocked look off her face. “Who said he was a prince? By his own admission he is a newspaperman.” She was bothered by

this startling fact, but Zale didn’t need to know that. There had to be an explanation.

“I’ve had time to put some of the pieces together. Besides, there’s a glow about him that sets him apart from the others. Don’t tell me you didn’t see it.”

“So that’s what makes him so handsome.” Mairin looked starry-eyed off into the sky. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Zale fuming. She

burst out laughing. “Oh, Zale. Don’t be so serious. We’re going to dinner.

We’re not getting married.”

“I don’t know *what* you’re doing. That’s the problem.”

Mairin didn’t know how to explain it to him without risk of him teasing her or dismissing her about her intentions. Instead, she thought it best to be vague and keep him guessing.

When they reached the entrance door, a volley of whistles sounded from the tenders to *Titanic*.

“Oh, no. Does that mean the ships are leaving? I was supposed to be in Cecily’s room before they left. I hope Charles didn’t catch her.”

“If Charles stopped her, does that mean we can go home?” Zale backed up and wheeled Mairin to the rails instead of taking her indoors. “If we’re late anyway, I wouldn’t mind watching the water a little longer. These waves are mesmerizing.”

“My mission has nothing to do with Cecily. Let’s assume she got off the ship until we know otherwise,” she said, craning her neck to see the water.

The solid railing around the deck blocked most of Mairin’s view. “Help me stand so I can see better.”

He held out his arms, and she stood, gritting her teeth against the pain.

What she saw astounded her. Below them, the water splashed against the ship and formed bubbles and spray like they'd never been able to see before. The colors churned in shades of black and blue and green and white.

All coming from her ocean.

Looking the other direction, she studied the rolling hills that were dotted with green trees. Land. The blurry photographs she'd seen did not do it justice.

"I can't believe we're seeing it, Zale. Land. Land! How will we explain this to everyone?"

"You're not going to make me swear to secrecy?"

"The queen might, but I won't. I want all of us to see life above-sea."

More humans joined them at the rails, watching their world disappear.

Meanwhile, seagulls followed the ship, soaring on the wind, their wings almost motionless. As the ship rounded the last bit of land, there was a consensus that they were officially on their way.

Mairin inclined her head. "What is that lovely sound?"

A passenger, turning to leave, stopped to answer. "Uilleann pipes," he said. "Someone from steerage is playing 'Erin's Lament.' The Irish like to mourn when they leave their homeland." He doffed his hat and continued on.

"Maybe I should sing you a mermaid's lament," Zale said. "Since you're leaving your homeland."

"But I'm not leaving our homeland. I'm saving it."

CHAPTER 13

“T his is a foolhardy notion if ever I’ve heard one.” Miss Higgins, the stewardess, waved the note Cecily sent her.

“She’s gone off the ship and left this room to you?” She opened her arms wide toward the wardrobe and dressing table.

Mairin nodded. “She insisted. But I’ll be no trouble to you.” Mairin sensed Miss Higgins was not as willing an accomplice as Cecily expected.

“You’re already trouble to me. What is proper about this?” She read from the note: “Do everything in your power to assist Miss Mairin in pretending to be me as long as possible to give me time to get my bearings.

When Charles discovers I’m gone, please do what you can to keep the peace.”

Miss Higgins shook her head. “Mr. Charles has already been up here looking for her. Are you sure she got off the ship?”

“I assume if she didn’t, she would come back here. I was supposed to be in the room before the tenders left, but I was delayed. If I was too late, there’s nothing to be done now.” She put on her best pleading look. “Cecily thought you would want to help. Was she wrong?”

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t. Just that the notion was foolhardy. She does beat all, don’t she? But if she didn’t make it off, I’m not hiding her for the

entire voyage. That would be asking too much. I’ve got other passengers to attend besides her.”

Mairin nodded. She needed to win Miss Higgins to her side, if not for Cecily’s sake, then for her own and her mermaid kingdom. How did Cecily convince everyone to do what she wanted? Mother had no trouble commanding the kingdom. She gave orders and merpeople carried them

out. Whenever Mairin said something, everyone ignored her or questioned her motives. She glanced at the door dividing her and Zale.

Miss Higgins pursed her lips. “I can’t keep telling Mr. Charles I can’t find her. That’ll launch a search of the ship.”

“I’m to periodically wear her hat in view of her manager so that he thinks he keeps missing her.”

Miss Higgins shook her head again, but a small smile played at her lips.

“I suppose it’ll be a fun game for the next week until we dock in New York.

We’ll see how long it lasts.”

Mairin smiled. “Thank you. Cecily has been so kind to me since we met. I want to help her.” *I also want to stay in this room.* Mairin was going to need her privacy away from all these humans. They were all a bit overwhelming.

“I’d say,” Miss Higgins took in the first-class accommodations again. “I wouldn’t mind some of her kindness myself.” She headed to the door.

“Before you go, I’ve got one question. I’m meeting someone for dinner at the Café Parisien. Am I wearing the right clothes?”

“You’ll be no trouble, you say?” Miss Higgins examined Mairin.

“That’s the rag they carried you in on. You might want something that’s been aired out and more appropriate for dining. I assume Miss Cecily gave you the run of her closet as well?”

Mairin nodded.

“Those in first class dress for every occasion. In the morning, you’ll put on your tailor-mades for breakfast. You’ll come back here to change into

your tea dress for the afternoon. After that, you'll wear an evening gown for dinner and also your best jewelry. That should do you."

"And you'll show me which those are? The tailor-mades from the tea dresses?" Mairin looked warily at the open wardrobe where a variety of colorful articles of clothing hung. She couldn't begin to know which was appropriate for which meal.

"Let's get you freshened up then. The first bugle has already sounded, so you've less than an hour till dinner. I assume the someone you are meeting is a man?"

Mairin placed the lace rose on the table. "Thank you for your help. You have been wonderful, welcoming me despite the unusual circumstances."

She didn't want to talk about the prince just yet.

"You'd be surprised what we consider unusual. As it is, on this ship we already know there are a number of card sharks trying to bilk the rich out of their riches. Several people are traveling under assumed names, and I know of at least one man who has booked his mother on one deck and his secret girlfriend on another. Nothing would shock me."

Mairin suppressed a grin and turned herself over to the care of the stewardess.

T

in the mirror staring back at Mairin looked beautiful, wide-eyed, and thoroughly human.

"A new you," chirped Miss Higgins. "A good comb-through and a touch of makeup, and it's like you've never seen yourself before."

Those weren't exactly the thoughts Marin was having. She was more fascinated with the clarity of the mirror. In that regard, she really never had seen herself before that glimpse in the elevator. Undersea, there were a few

reflective items that found their way to the bottom, but they were small or broken. You could never get a good look at all of your face all at once.

Miss Higgins puttered around the room, tidying what they'd gone through of Cecily's abandoned belongings. "I didn't want to tell you before, but when you came into the hospital, you weren't exactly in first-class condition. Your clothes were damp and your hair, well, it needed a good cleansing. They almost didn't let you on, but we were in such a hurry they figured they could kick you off in Queenstown if there had been a mistake.

Well, I've said too much. You'll be looking fine and dandy once we get a new gown on you, miss. Like one of them royals. The fellow you're meeting will be pleased."

Miss Higgins, in a rather quick and efficient fashion, had combed through Mairin's unruly hair and pinned it up with Cecily's hair combs.

While Mairin studied her own reflection, the stewardess searched the wardrobe and then held up two dresses for Mairin's inspection.

One was a pale coral and the other a brilliant purple. "These spring chiffons would be comfortable to sit in all night. You might need a blanket though, if you go out on deck. Tomorrow night, you may want something warmer, but either of these would work for tonight."

The dresses were both high-waisted, with flowing skirts that looked light enough to wear while swimming. The muted coral reminded Mairin of the dull colors at the deepest depths of the ocean where even her keen mermaid eyes had trouble seeing. But Mairin especially liked the way the bodice of the purple one glittered in the light, the way her scales did undersea. She pointed to it.

"Very well."

Nothing was muted about Mairin now. Her wide eyes stared back at her.

With her long hair pulled away from her slim neck, all attention went to her rather pointed nose and high cheekbones, like those of her mother.

The stewardess fingered the sides of the bodice before taking the dress off the hanger and handing it to Mairin. “I bet there’s whale bone sewn in there to make the bodice hold its shape. This dress must’ve cost her a pretty penny.” She returned to exploring Cecily’s wardrobe.

Mairin studied the dress she’d picked to wear to dinner. The ribbing in the bodice made it stand up almost on its own. On the outside, the fabric had been sewn into pleats and then decorated with tiny beads that glittered in the light. Clever, these humans.

While Miss Higgins fussed with the clothing in the wardrobe, Mairin changed into the purple dress. Her feet shot slices of pain up her legs as she stood to adjust the skirt. The cool fabric swished around her legs like a current of water rushing by, but did nothing to dampen the hurt. She hoped over time the pain in her legs would go away, otherwise her mobility would be severely hampered above-sea. Humans didn’t know how much freedom they could have in the water where gravity didn’t hold you down so firmly.

Mairin returned to examining herself in the mirror, wondering what Zale would say of her new human look. She reached for Mr. Jespersen’s lace broach. “And this?”

Miss Higgins frowned. “We could replace your necklace with one of Cecily’s. She took most of her jewelry with her, but left two or three pieces behind.” Miss Higgins reached to undo the clasp.

“No!” Mairin covered the pearl necklace with her hand. “Thank you.

This one is special.”

“Must be. You fought me earlier in the hospital when I tried to take it off.” She pinned the broach onto the dress. “Seems then, you’re done,” Miss Higgins declared.

The whole treatment was so enjoyable, Mairin wondered if she could talk her mother into getting Mairin a stewardess of her own. Having one was such a time saver. Perhaps Miss Higgins would consent to drinking the finman’s potion, and it would give her a tail so she could live undersea.

“What you need is a maid,” Miss Higgins said, as if reading Mairin’s thoughts. “I’m doing the work of two people here.”

Mairin hoped Miss Higgins wasn’t hinting that she wanted to leave. She was Mairin’s best source of human information. “Oh. Well, I’m thankful for your help. I feel a bit out of place.”

“I bet you do. When I’ve got more time, I want to hear your story.”

“Not much to tell. This is the most exciting thing that’s happened to me in my whole life.” She adjusted her wheelchair so she could roll through the door. Already, she was able to handle the chair better. *Now. Off to meet my prince.*

Miss Higgins opened the door to Zale’s wide shoulders guarding the hallway. He spun round, and his jaw dropped.

Miss Higgins squeezed past him, a big smile on her face.

Suddenly, Mairin questioned her decision to wear one of Cecily’s fanciest dresses. “What’s wrong?” She looked down at the pretty fabric covering her legs.

“With you? Absolutely nothing. With that guy? Everything. He’s not for you, Mairs. You’re teasing the sharks if you think you can play at being a human girl and not get hurt.”

Her plan was to flirt her way to freedom, not permanent legs. There was no way she’d confide her true plans now. He’d only keep trying to talk her out of it and lower her confidence all the while.

“You and Kai never did think I could do anything right. All our growing-up years you two relentlessly put me down.”

Zale frowned. “We were young. And you followed us everywhere.”

“You could have been nicer.”

“I’m sorry. I was trying to impress your brother. He is a prince of the sea.”

“And I’m a princess. You didn’t want to impress me?”

“Not then.” He cleared his throat. “The bugler has already played his second tune. We ought to get you to the restaurant.” He came round and took command of her chair. “It’s kind of catchy. I heard someone singing along.” He started whistling, then sang in his deep baritone: *When mighty Roast Beef was the Englishman’s food, It ennobled our brains and enriched our blood.*

Our soldiers were brave and our courtiers were good:

Oh! The Roast Beef of Old England

And Old English Roast Beef!

Mairin interrupted, “Are we having roast beef for dinner? What do you think it tastes like?”

“No idea. Apparently, they play that song before every dinner. Not sure why. Down below they use a gong. Shall we ask your mother if we could employ a bugler undersea? Maybe a trumpet fish?”

“Sounds like you’ve been doing some exploring of your own.” She ignored the reference to her mother and the joke about the fish.

“I don’t have a room to hide out in like you do. I have to keep moving so no one pays me any attention.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry. According to Miss Higgins, as my chauffeur you should have a second-class cabin, but I don’t know how to get you one, considering I’m impersonating Cecily for the time being.”

“I could hide out in your room.” He gave her an imploring look.

“That’s not proper. In case you haven’t noticed, the people around here do things in particular ways.” She was proud of her knowledge of above-sea customs and how quickly her training came to mind.

“Ah, I’m pretty sure there are some improper things going on around here. I’ve seen some couples sneaking around ship looking guilty about

something.” He pointed to the couple walking in front of them, a middle-aged gentleman with a much younger woman. “Everyone’s talking about that pair of newlyweds,” he said. “He’s forty-seven, and she’s only eighteen, a large age-gap for humans. And, for the extra curious, he’s also the richest man on the ship.”

Mairin quickly looked away, realizing Zale was pointing at the lady from the tender who’d recognized her pilfered hat on Mairin’s head. She had no intention of getting close to that woman again. The woman had a new lace jacket draped on her arm that the man had purchased for her earlier. “They’ve got nothing to do with us. Make sure we sit far away from them. In fact, let’s wait for them to get on the elevator ahead of us.”

“They’re taking the grand staircase. You’re fine. Besides, we’re meeting the human at the Parisien. But that means you’ll have some explaining to do when Cecily doesn’t show up at her assigned table in the dining room.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that was how the dinners worked.” She shifted, causing a shooting pain to go down her right leg. “Charles is too late anyway. The ship won’t turn around to pursue Cecily. Everything above-sea is orderly, done to the clock. They won’t go backward. I only hope he doesn’t get too angry and make me leave the stateroom.”

“That wouldn’t be a bad thing. Then we can forget this nonsense and go home. Who knows what has happened there since we left? They could be under a full-scale attack from the finfolk for all we know. Why are we wasting our time with this human?”

“We aren’t wasting our time. He’s important to our kingdom. As the descendant of my aunt’s prince, he’s the key to us regaining our freedom to surface.”

“So that’s who he is. Was that so hard? How is he the key?”

“Zale! I’ve told you too much already.”

They’d arrived at the elevator where an older gentleman stood waiting, and Zale dropped his questioning. The attendant opened the door and

invited them in.

“A-deck,” Zale said.

“I thought it was B-deck,” Mairin whispered, not wanting to draw attention to herself around the humans.

“I’m going to show you something.”

The older gentleman wore a white tie along with a black dinner jacket that was significantly longer at the back than the one Zale wore. He talked with Zale about the wonders of the ship. “It’s a fine smoking room on board. Have you seen it? I left the missus in the reading room last night and had a nightcap. Jovial crowd aboard.”

While they talked, Mairin mused over Zale’s concerns. He had a way of cutting right to the heart. But he didn’t have all the facts, and she wasn’t prepared to tell him everything. He would only try to make her doubt what she was doing. She had enough doubts of her own she had to keep pushing aside. Mostly, fear that she wouldn’t be able to make the human fall in love with her. The Little Mermaid failed. Why would Mairin be any different?

“You’re right,” she said, as they exited the elevator. “Maybe you should go home now and find out what is going on undersea. My father and the guards could use your help.” She certainly hoped there wasn’t a full-scale attack going on. The finman promised her, but that didn’t mean the sea witch would agree to act peacefully while Mairin tried to solve their common problem.

Zale wheeled her around the corner and pointed to the ceiling, “Look up there. Remind you of anything?”

She skimmed past the brass cherub statue at the base of the double staircase, over the wall clock, and up to the roof where a frosted-glass dome hovered like a white jellyfish. This skylight with its bold ironwork was the

prettiest thing she’d seen on a ship filled with pretty things. The view reminded her of looking up at the sun from undersea. She knew exactly what Zale was trying to do, and she wouldn’t let him get away with it.

“It’s a frosted window,” she said dryly, trying not to show how it affected her. Just because she wanted the freedom to go above-sea didn’t mean she wanted to live up here full time.

Zale turned away, obviously disappointed in her reaction. “Let’s go. The Parisien is back down this way. Our detour didn’t make you late.”

CHAPTER 14

O n B-deck, the reception area for the two restaurants lay at the base of the aft stairs. Here, folks waiting for their dining companions sat in rounded, high-backed chairs or stood in small groups and marveled over the ship. While this staircase was not as fancy as the one at the bow where the elevators were, it was of the same character: oak trimmed with fanciful wrought iron decorated with garland carvings.

The cream and black star-patterned floor was covered with the occasional carpet that softened the click of ladies' shoes. Around the room, potted palms created the feeling of an indoor garden.

The glowing prince sat with another gentleman in one of the high-backed chairs. Like the other men, he had changed into a white dress shirt and tie under a black tuxedo jacket with satin lapels.

These humans really liked their clothes. Mairin caught herself fingering the beading on Cecily's dress and let go. She had to guard herself against developing a liking to human trinkets while she was above-sea, no matter how tempting.

The prince saw her and ended the conversation. As he started toward her, she suddenly became very nervous. Undersea, she was a princess and everyone knew it. They deferred to her, and this made her feel in control, even if they didn't treat her with the same deference as the queen. Above-

sea, no one knew who she was, and she was utterly on her own, despite Zale being at her side.

Miss Pearl had taught that humans and mermaids were alike in so many ways that if not for the merpeople's tails, they could converse unawares with a human. That male humans were often distracted by the beauty of a mermaid, so they were easiest of all to speak to. Mairin wasn't so sure.

Before she had time to think up a strategy, he was standing in front of her.

“Good evening. You wore the broach,” He smiled, then looked over Zale’s shoulder and then returned his gaze to Mairin. “Shall we wait for Cecily?”

“She couldn’t make it,” Mairin said. Zale quietly snorted, and she amped up her smile for Edwin’s benefit.

“Just us then,” the prince said. “No problem. We’ll have a splendid time. I ate here yesterday, and the food is excellent.”

The prince stepped forward to take control of the wheelchair, but Zale puffed out his chest and maintained a firm grasp.

“You can trust me,” the prince said. “I can take her from here.” His eyes briefly lowered to Zale’s dark jacket and Mairin understood.

“You’re not wearing the proper dinner clothes,” she whispered. Zale hadn’t changed from his earlier borrowed clothes, and he stuck out. Mairin blended in with the other women in brightly colored dresses who glittered and swirled like tropical fish in the summer currents.

The wheelchair jerked as Zale let go. “Fine. Enjoy your dinner,” he said with a formal bow before turning and strutting away.

Mairin took a deep breath and let it go. He would get over it. She hadn’t asked him to stay in the first place, so he shouldn’t feel so put out.

The prince wheeled Mairin into the restaurant. “I don’t think he trusts me.”

“He’s protective of me, that’s all.” She didn’t know if she should be more flattered or annoyed. She was both, equally.

“Bonjour,” a steward dressed in white jacket, black pants, and black bowtie welcomed them to the Parisien. He led them to the window side of the room, to a square oak table. He took one of the white wicker chairs away to make room for Mairin’s wheelchair. The prince tucked her into the vacant side of the table.

“Is this position good?” he asked.

“Perfect.” She smiled.

“I hope you don’t consider me forward, inviting you like this.” He sat across from her. “Seeing as though I’ve never traveled on a ship, I’m not an expert at all the formalities. I may be a terrible dining companion.

Hopefully, you don’t mind me practicing my sailing etiquette on a stranger.”

“Oh, is that why you invited me? To practice?”

“No. Not at all. If Cecily hadn’t introduced us, we would have traveled all the way to New York having never spoken. And that would be a pity.”

“Mr. Jespersen—”

“Call me Edwin.”

“Edwin, let me confess that this is also my first time on a ship. We can make all our mistakes together.”

The prince smiled widely. He nodded. “I’d like that, Miss Mairin.”

A waiter arrived and filled their glasses with water. *“Anglais ou français?”*

“English, please,” Edwin said.

“Ready to order?”

Mairin picked up the menu, following Edwin’s lead, and read the choices. There wasn’t much opportunity for reading undersea, so she read the menu several times, delighting in the words she added to her vocabulary: *filet mignon, chateau potatoes, cold asparagus vinaigrette*.

When she looked up, she realized both men were staring at her.

“What would you like?” Edwin asked.

“It all looks so good,” she said, returning to the menu. “What are you having?”

Edwin placed his order for poached salmon and mousseline sauce, and Mairin did the same. She didn’t know what would taste good, and was glad the prince ordered something familiar.

After the waiter left, Edwin asked, “Did I see you and Cecily in the hospital earlier?”

“Yes, that’s where she and I met.”

“And what did you think of the hospital and the service you received?”

Mairin was about to speak, but paused, sensing someone staring at her.

She looked across the room where she met Zale’s pointed gaze. Dressed in a white tie with his hair combed like the other men, he was attracting the attention of a nearby table of young women. The steward seated him directly in her line of sight.

Mouth suddenly extra dry, Mairin reached for her water glass and tipped it over. The water spilled across the table, heading toward the glowing prince.

He quickly mopped up the puddle with a cloth napkin. “I’m sure things spill all the time on a ship like this. *Whew*. Seems choppy to me.” He dabbed his forehead with the damp napkin. The waiter returned to the table with fresh napkins and refilled her glass. He was gone before she could thank him.

Edwin cleared his throat. “How did you like the doctor? He told me I should eat something to settle my stomach. I saw him earlier about a touch of seasickness.” He dabbed at his forehead again. “I hope you don’t mind me hounding you with questions. As a reporter, it comes naturally. I’m writing several pieces about *Titanic,* so it’s on my mind what your thoughts would be, as a new traveler.”

“Oh, yes, that’s fine.” Mairin watched Zale as he made a big show of shaking out his napkin and placing it on his lap. He acted as if he sat at a

table every day of his life.

The prince turned around, and Zale nodded at him. “Your *erm*—

chauffeur really doesn’t seem to like me much.”

She waved her hand dismissively. “My mother pays him to be overly protective.” She glared at Zale. “Tell me about your family.” She was curious about what he knew regarding the promise the Little Mermaid had extracted out of her people.

“Not much to tell. I’m an only child. It’s just me and my mum now. As I said, I’m a reporter. Had I been born in an earlier generation, I would have been a shipbuilder.”

“Oh?”

“The Jespersens have a long history of shipbuilding, going all the way back to the Vikings.”

“Shipbuilding? You’re really not a prince?!” Her voice came out louder than intended, and Zale looked over at her outburst. She adjusted position so Edwin blocked her view. Did it matter that he wasn’t a prince for her to complete the cycle? A sea princess with a commoner?

Edwin laughed. “Maybe if a few wars had gone differently. My family goes back to seafaring Viking royalty, but nothing I could claim today.” His smile faded. “Did you think I was a prince? I’m not even staying in first class. They’ve given me a shared berth in second but with free rein of the ship for my articles. Sorry to disappoint.”

“Oh, I’m not disappointed.” Mairin took another sip of the saltless water.

“I’m so interested in ships because my family used to have a large shipbuilding company. In fact, a distant cousin invented the modern propeller used on this ship. *Titanic* has a triple screw system, three large propellers that…” his voice faded away. “You sure you don’t mind talking about this? Most young ladies’ eyes have glazed over by now.”

Mairin shook her head. “No, I love hearing about shipbuilding. It’s such a fascinating subject.” In truth, it wasn’t the most engaging topic, but since she was looking for the connection to her own family’s history, she had more interest than most human girls. “Didn’t your ancestors live in a castle?” she pressed. Mairin was sure the Little Mermaid’s story involved a prince and a castle.

Edwin laughed again. “My great-grandfather spent a lot of time at Kronborg castle in Denmark. He was great friends with King Frederick VI and often stayed for months. It’s right on the sea, so perfect for watching the ships come and go. He even got married there.”

That explained it. She tried to send Zale a satisfied look but he was busy ordering.

“But it’s a good thing he got scared off ships for good since I’m not much into riveting. It’s hard work what those men do. And my calculations aren’t so accurate for drafting. Eventually, my father sold what was left of the company in order to pursue his own interests. Then we moved away from Copenhagen and lived all over. Presently I’m in London.”

Mairin inclined her head, wanting to go back to the part of the story with Edwin’s ancestor. “What did you mean when you said your great grandfather got *scared off* ships?”

He laughed. “Funny story, really. As a young man, he loved the ocean. It was almost like salt water flowed in his veins. But one day, all that changed.”

Now the story was getting interesting. A mermaid could relate to a man like this, one who loved the ocean. Mairin leaned forward. “What happened?”

“He almost drowned in a shipwreck on his birthday. They were testing out a new design, maiden voyage. A huge storm came up and blew them off course. They must have ended up in some rocks, tearing the ship apart. He

said he was drowning, and a mermaid saved him.” Edwin smiled. “That was the funny part. To his dying day, he claimed he was rescued by a mermaid.”

“Well, maybe he was,” Mairin said. Nothing funny there.

Edwin looked quizzical. “Yeah. Maybe he was. Anyway, he rarely went near the ocean again.”

Zale rolled his eyes, and Mairin chided herself for looking his way. She focused back on Edwin.

“Instead, he went into production of distress rockets for ships that are foundering at sea. Another cousin had come up with a method. Anyway, he dedicated his life to various means and methods of rescue.”

“That’s…admirable.” Mairin had assumed the family came from a long line of scalawags bent on breaking young hearts. She didn’t want to like them, and especially not Edwin, but he had a kind way about him that was surprising.

“Still, ships fascinate me,” Edwin continued, “and I’m here as a reporter to talk about the first voyage of the largest ever moving man-made object.

The advancements on this ship are amazing. I can send brief newspaper reports via the wireless every night. The only trouble is, the new Marconi is a novelty, so every Tom, Dick, and Harry is sending a note home to their mum. They’ve already got a backlog of messages to send.”

“The ocean is a marvelous place,” Mairin said. She felt the need to defend her homeland and started in on all the wonders contained within its depths. “So you see, once you get past the initial fear of water, there is much to explore. Perhaps you could start with a seashell collection. I’ve heard those are quite popular.”

Their waiter arrived with the first course of food. When he slid a plate of oysters in front of Edwin, Edwin’s face turned pale.

“Perhaps I should get some fresh air. I’m sorry, Miss Mairin. I’m not the most robust dinner companion. I hear that one eventually gets used to the motion.” He stood and then bolted from the room.

Zale watched Edwin go before making his way over. “Something you said?”

“Oh, stop. He’s not used to the way the ocean feels. Take me outside, would you?” She was afraid by the time she maneuvered out the door Edwin would be gone. She also needed to make sure in his weakened state he didn’t fall overboard.

Zale wheeled her out to the reception room, but stopped at the doors to the outside deck where he glanced out the window.

“Seems to me he’s a little busy right now. Might want to give the man a moment to compose himself.” Zale looked like he was trying but failing to suppress a smile.

“Fine. But only for a minute. I can’t lose him.” Mairin examined the folks still milling about in the reception room, again noting the men’s attire.

“Where did you get your jacket from?”

“You’d be surprised at what’s available for the taking on this ship.”

“Zale!”

“I’m only borrowing so I can keep an eye on you. I’ll put it all back.

Can you believe they call these tails?” He flipped the back of his long jacket.

“I don’t need you keeping an eye on me.” She pointed to the door.

“Okay, that’s long enough. Let’s go outside.”

Zale brought Mairin outside into the cold air. The sun had gone down, but it wasn’t quite dark yet. The wind blasted them, cutting right through the thin fabric of Cecily’s dress.

“You’re shivering,” he said. “You shouldn’t be out here.” He started to wheel her back.

“No, I’m fine. The wind caught me off guard. We’re not used to it. I thought wind would feel more like a water current against the skin, but it’s different.” She pointed to the rail where Edwin leaned, his hands clasped out over the water, his head bowed. “There he is.”

“If I pushed him into the water, would you follow?”

Zale’s voice was flat, and Mairin couldn’t tell if he meant it or not.

“Don’t even joke about that. I have to keep him out of the water.”

“Oh, is that what we’re doing here? Keeping the descendant of the so-called prince from getting wet? What does that have to do with you? I could lash him to the mast and be done with it.”

“Miss Mairin!” called Charles, who arrived bundled in a wool coat with the lapels pulled high by his ears. “I’m looking for Cecily. Have you seen her?”

Mairin was glad for the interruption. Zale was getting too demanding.

She eagerly turned to him. “Hello, there. How are you enjoying *Titanic*?”

Mairin avoided the question by asking what seemed to be a common discussion amongst the passengers. “What did you think of the gymnasium?”

Sufficiently distracted, Charles gave a detailed account of the equipment he tried. “The electric camel left much to be desired, but I must say, I enjoyed the rowing machine. I’ll be able to tell folks back home how I rowed across the Atlantic.”

“Clever,” Zale drolled.

Charles glanced at Zale. “But about Cecily,” he said, back on task. “Do you think she might be in the reading room with the other women? If you see her, tell her to meet me for breakfast.” He twisted his lips. “I’m not above going to her room early to pound on her door until she gets moving.

We have work to discuss.”

With an eye on Edwin, she said, “If I see her, I’ll let you know.” Charles stalked off, and Mairin twisted in her chair to make sure she had Zale’s full attention. “Why don’t you try the smoking room, whatever that is. Seems all the men are congregating there tonight.”

He started to object when the group of young women from the restaurant exited, *their* attention clearly still on Zale. He straightened his

dinner jacket. “I think I’ll find out where the ladies are congregating, if you don’t mind. See if that human over there can help you find your way back to Cecily’s room.” He strode off with a tantalizing swagger.

Mairin frowned. “I will,” she said to his retreating back. *If you want to make a fool of yourself, go ahead. Meanwhile, I’m busy securing our freedom.*

CHAPTER 15

A s Zale disappeared into the after-dinner crowd, Mairin sighed. Zale was a fine merman who could flirt when he wanted to. She watched him until one of the ladies turned around and said something to him. Mairin's stomach flipped. She put her hand on her belly. Hopefully she wasn't getting seasick again.

She turned away from Zale and wheeled herself the rest of the way to the rail.

As the wind blew across the water, the scent of the sea called to her, and her legs twitched as if sensing freedom. *Ha.* Freedom undersea. She was finally free, outside of the barrier that locked her and her people under the waves. She *was* free. Temporarily free.

She put on a smile as she reached Edwin. "Feeling better?"

Edwin turned around, the color in his face returned. "Hi. Sorry about that. Yes. The agreeable thing about the ocean is that it is large enough that it can take whatever you hurl at it."

Mairin was unsure what he meant, so she nodded. "I love the water and the way it feels against my skin. It's home to me."

"You can swim?" He glanced at her legs. "I mean, I apologize. I don't want to pry."

She tried to put him at ease. "My legs prefer water to air."

He smiled, that dimple revealing itself again. "Bet you swim like a fish."

Mairin tried not to laugh, but a chuckle escaped as she slipped into her role as a romantic interest for this human. "You could say that."

There was something pleasing about Edwin. Not at all what she expected a human to be like. She'd best keep her guard up, or she'd follow her aunt's

path in more ways than one. She leaned into the smell of the ocean, hoping for the spray to reach her and remind her of her loyalties.

These humans meant nothing to her. They were keeping her and the other merpeople from having the freedom the generations before her had always had.

“That’s another thing my family has never been too keen on.”

Mairin snapped back to the conversation. “Sorry, I was distracted by the water. What were you saying?”

“Swimming. I don’t know how. Good thing we’re on board an unsinkable ship. I might not have come otherwise. Captain Smith is so congenial, it would have been hard to refuse his invitation.”

Mairin marveled at Edwin’s honesty. If he was, in fact, being honest.

The other human, Cecily, seemed to tell so many half truths she probably believed she was speaking the whole truth. Truth was only truth if it benefited her. But who was Mairin to cast judgment when she, herself, was attempting to deceive Edwin? His kindness might be her undoing. She wasn’t on this ship to be nice or to come to some sort of understanding with humans. She was here to complete the circle.

His hands gripped the rails. “Although, some people have said boasting a ship is unsinkable is too proud a claim and flies in the face of God.

Several people I talked to in London refuse to sail on maiden voyages as a rule, but on this ship in particular because of that claim.”

A voice spoke as if in her ear. *Be careful, foolish mermaid, or your legend will be bigger than mine.*

Alarmed, Mairin inclined her head. She’d heard that voice before, when she was in the waters near Southampton.

“What is it?” Edwin asked.

“I thought I heard something, but it must be the waves against the ship.”

“Could be the trio playing, though I can’t hear anything.”

Perhaps she could hear the music, faintly, beyond the sea spray, the murmur of voices, the rumble of the engine, and the clanking of dishes that escaped from the restaurant whenever someone opened the door.

Mairin was missing the nightly gathering of her people for their sing-alongs. She would enjoy showing these humans how beautiful a mermaid’s voice could be. She bit her lip. That wasn’t quite the truth, now was it?

She’d be showing the humans how beautiful the Little Mermaid’s gift could be. What if all the mermaids lost their ability to sing so beautifully when Mairin broke the barrier for them? Was freedom to go above-sea better than their voices? She thought so.

Edwin turned his back to the water. “The quintet will play in the reception room of the first-class dining saloon on D-deck for after-dinner entertainment, and then they will move on to play in second class for another hour. If you have your request booklet, you can pick a number, and they’ll play it.”

“I wouldn’t know what to ask for.”

“We could go listen at either location if you’d like. At some point, I need to visit both rooms for my articles.”

Thinking of music back home twinged her conscience a little. Her gaze traveled to where she’d last seen Zale. “What do the young people do on board?”

Edwin smiled. “Card parties, from what I’ve seen. Do you play? There was a fun group in the lounge last night.”

“I don’t know how to play.” She looked demurely at him. “Maybe you could teach me.” Her acting felt false, but Edwin didn’t seem to notice.

“I’d be happy to show you what I know. Do you want me to steer?”

“Please.”

Edwin chatted readily as he brought her to the elevator. The boy in uniform inside the elevator smiled, but his gaze focused on the world outside his small box as if longing to leave. She knew that feeling.

“Do they keep you locked in here?” she asked him. Seemed like something humans would do.

He looked shocked. “No, miss. I just like to keep an eye on things. My mother will want a full account when I get home. Never been a ship like *Titanic*.”

“You’re away from your mother? How old are you?”

“Seventeen, miss.” He closed the gate behind them.

Same as her. His wistful expression reminded Mairin of how she used to stare up toward the surface. She looked away. Who cares what this boy thought of the ship or what his hopes and dreams were? Their world was not her concern.

“Oh, don’t get the wrong impression. This is a great job, miss. My brother’s a trimmer down below. Right now, while I’m enjoying the sights, he’s shoveling coal to keep the engines going. I’ll have more to talk about than he will.” He cleared his throat. “Where to?”

“Up one. Promenade,” Edwin answered, as smooth as if he rode an elevator every day of his life.

The attendant pulled the lever, and the elevator hummed as it rose.

Mairin considered the attendant. He stared straight ahead, a pleasant look on his face. All these humans were enamored of this ship, even the ones her age. Everywhere she went people discussed the grand staircase or the size of their rooms, the types of food available or the smoothness of the ride. As Mairin had nothing to compare *Titanic* to, she’d have to take their word. What she saw did impress her.

Her only complaint was that everything was so dry. Objects stayed put as there were no currents to sweep them away. The sensation was still so foreign to her. She hoped her enthusiasm for the things of this world looked like awe of the new ship instead of awe for all things human. It would take her months on the ship to see everything she wanted to see.

The woman beside her surreptitiously touched the paneling, and so Mairin did the same. Their eyes met in the mirror, and they smiled. Mairin's assumptions about humans shifted yet again. She'd expected them to ignore their surroundings, not realizing how amazing life above-sea was. Yet, here was this woman as curious about the ship as she was.

In all likelihood, *Titanic* was not the woman's first encounter with a ship, nor was it Mairin's first encounter. But ships lying at the bottom of the ocean were ghostly vessels, their shine dulled and hulls broken. Bacteria slowly ate at the ships until they collapsed onto the seafloor. There was nothing majestic about human objects at the bottom of the sea.

CHAPTER 16

Edwin stopped just inside the doors to the first-class lounge. “Well?

What do you think? Remember, I might quote you in my story. I’m told this room has been done up in Louis XV style, with carved English oak panels, lighted wall sconces, and luxurious fabrics.”

“It’s…it’s…wonderful.” From green carpeted floor to paneled ceiling, the lavish room was like nothing Mairin had ever seen on any ship, even a new wreck that hadn’t been devoured by sea scavengers. Everywhere she looked, wood was the focus, carved into lines and curves and shapes of musical instruments.

The room welcomed her in, even as it evoked a sense of awe similar to the way her family’s throne room often did. It must have been the high ceiling. Everywhere else on board, the ceiling was low, but not here. In the center of the room, there was an oval recess with a dramatic electrolier providing light.

Throughout the room, clusters of chairs surrounding small oak tables created space for intimate gatherings. The dark-wood chairs and sofas were invitingly decorated in velvety green and gold florals.

Mairin looked for Zale in every grouping of girls but didn’t see him.

Where could he be? She didn’t trust him out on his own. He may tell her to

stay away from human men, but had he thought about himself falling for a human girl?

“What’s your favorite part?” Edwin called her back to his presence again.

Her gaze landed on a fireplace with an arrangement of flowers above the mantle. “I thought fireplaces were only in houses.” *Miss Pearl will be delighted to find out about a moving fireplace.*

“I believe there is an electric heater in there. The only fire on board is in the boiler room. Is that your favorite thing about this room?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“Well, let’s find two more people, and we can get a game started.”

She and Edwin wandered around the room. He looked for card partners while she looked for Zale. A chorus of laughter burst out from the corner near the window. There were the girls from the restaurant with Zale in the middle of them all.

“Did I win?” Zale held up a handful of cards.

“Look, there’s your, er, what exactly is he to you?”

“My chauffeur.”

“Right.” Edwin sounded confused, just as Miss Higgins had. Maybe they had chosen the wrong profession for Zale to have.

“Well, it looks as if their table is full. Shall we try over here?”

“Are you looking for a game of cards?” A middle-aged woman with auburn hair and a pert mouth, wearing long rows of pearls, called to them.

“Our party is late, and I’m bored. Do you know Auction Bridge?” A younger woman dressed in chiffon sat at her side and was busy shuffling a deck of cards.

“Yes, it’s a great game. Miss Mairin?” Edwin removed a chair from the square table to make way for her.

She shook her head. “I’ll watch.”

“Nonsense,” said the woman. “We need a fourth. You’ll pick it up quickly. The young people always do. Now, who are you two?”

“Edwin Jespersen, previously of Heartland Shipping, now reporter for *The Chronicle*.” He extended his hand to be shaken. “And this is Miss Mairin, first time traveler and…” He looked at her blankly. “I don’t seem to know who your family is.”

“I come from a very old family with a palace in the North Sea,” she said haughtily.

Edwin sat opposite her while the two women exchanged a bemused look that irritated Mairin.

“Mrs. Duff Gordon and this is my secretary, Miss Francatelli.”

“You told her,” Miss Francatelli chided. “What happened to keeping it a secret?”

Mrs. Duff Gordon smiled at Mairin. “I have a feeling about this one.”

She began placing cards one by one in front of them.

Mairin picked up her cards the way Edwin did, copying his every move.

How was she going to survive close interaction with this keen-eyed woman?

“Is that dress comfortable, Miss Mairin? Sitting the way you do all day?”

Mairin squirmed under Mrs. Duff Gordon’s gaze. “Oh, I’m sure it’s fine.” She ordered her cards at random.

“Who are your favorite designers?” Miss Francatelli asked.

“I don’t have a favorite.” Mairin sent a pleading look to Edwin. She needed to get him alone again. These women were not part of the plan.

“What do you think of *Lucile’s*?”

Mairin looked up from her cards. “Where is she? I’ll tell you what I think of her dress.”

The two exchanged a bemused glance again. What was Mairin doing wrong? “Mrs. Duff Gordon is *Lucile’s*,” the secretary said. “She can’t help

but dress everyone around her.”

Mrs. Duff Gordon peeked over her cards. “Why, Mr. Jespersen, you’re blushing. You must have heard something about me.”

“No, ma’am.” He put his cards facedown on the table before walking over to help Mairin organize hers. “You don’t mind if I help her get started, do you?”

“Not at all. It’ll give me more time to study her.”

Mairin didn’t want to be studied. If someone looked too closely, they would find out she was different. “What do I play?” she asked Edwin, hoping to move the conversation back to the game.

He quickly explained how the game worked, but Mairin couldn’t follow.

There was bidding and trying to win a trick. Something about suits and trumps and adding points. They had nothing like this undersea. She must have looked as distressed as she felt, for Mrs. Duff Gordon intervened.

“I’d much rather dress you than play cards. Mr. Jespersen, would you go to the smoking room and see what is keeping my Cosmo? He’ll likely be smoking a cigar with Mr. Astor unless that young wife of his wouldn’t let him out on his own.”

Edwin nodded. “Miss Mairin? I’ll be back shortly.”

Don’t leave. Mairin pleaded with her eyes, but he didn’t understand.

This woman would eat her up like a shark.

Miss Francatelli took Mairin’s cards from her and added them to the deck. “You seem already familiar with *Lucile’s*.”

“Oh, how so?”

Her gaze skimmed Mairin's outfit, but Mrs. Duff Gordon answered.

"You're wearing one of my personality dresses. Created recently for an unappreciative singer by the looks of things."

Mairin's face burned. "Cecily? She's letting me wear some of her clothing since, uh, my things did not make it on board."

"That was kind of her. I didn't realize she was on *Titanic.* Normally, she draws attention wherever she goes." Mrs. Duff Gordon smiled.

Mairin's heart sank. Would these two women expose her? "I met her in the hospital. Neither one of us were feeling good yesterday."

"Miss Mairin," the secretary said, "you should be so lucky to get one of *Lucile's* personality dresses. While that one is lovely, it was not meant for you."

"Oh?"

Mrs. Duff Gordon handed her cards to Miss Francatelli. "I feel it's important to dress a woman based on what is uniquely her. I have to study her and see how she moves. Discover her outlook on life. I may alter her style of dress or the way she does her hair, but when I am done with her, she is more like herself than she's ever been. You, for example, should wear a gown slightly longer than someone your height would normally wear since you spend so much time seated."

The secretary smiled and nodded encouragingly.

"Sounds…fascinating." What would these ladies do if they discovered Mairin's most comfortable self was one that included cobalt-blue scales and fins? The more she came under scrutiny, the quicker her confidence slipped away. Without looking at Zale, Mairin nodded along with Miss Francatelli.

Mairin wasn't being true to her upbringing, or to herself. What was she doing? These humans were twisting things out of control.

Mrs. Duff Gordon pulled out a slim book. “Here, sign my confession book. Your answers will help me decide your look. You shouldn’t go around wearing another woman’s dress.” She slid the book across the table.

Mairin shook her head. “You don’t have to make anything for me. We’ll be in New York, soon.”

“Nonsense. I don’t offer my services to just anyone, do I Franks?” She waggled her finger. “There’s something different about you. Something understated that I’d like to develop.”

“Trust her,” Miss Francatelli said.

Mairin looked down at the confession book. These women were pushier than her aunts. “I’ll think about it,” she said and opened the book. She was glad she’d taken the time to examine Cecily’s book and try writing in it. Her penmanship wasn’t too bad for someone who’d never written with a fountain pen before. Feeling their gazes still on her, she dug into Cecily’s purse and pulled out the singer’s confession book. “Can you sign this one?

Cecily asked me to pass it around for her.”

Mrs. Duff Gordon took the cap off her own pen. “She must be under the weather. I’m happy to sign her book. She can read all the confessions tonight and feel like she was a part of the entertainment. Aren’t these fun?”

Another cheer rose from Zale’s table. Mairin focused on forming her letters. “Yes, great fun.” It seemed she’d put off the two women, but for how long? She’d have to add them to the list of people to avoid on the ship, right after Charles.

Mairin copied answers from those who had written before her, to make it easier. Someone named Charlotte had written that her madness was chocolate. Mairin had yet to try the sweet treat, but Miss Pearl had taught it was the most magnificent substance and quite addictive. Mairin wrote chocolate as her madness as well. She’d try it at first opportunity.

Her pen paused over the lists of madnesses.

“Oh, Edgar Meyer,” Miss Francatelli said, reading where Mairin’s pen had paused. “He says his only madness is to live. He was joking, but I think he’s nervous about traveling on a new ship.”

“Why is a new ship different from traveling on an old ship?” Mairin asked, trying to figure out these humans. Seemed a new ship wouldn’t have any leaks yet. The old ones she’d seen tended to sink.

Mrs. Duff Gordon signed Cecily’s book with great flourishes. “A few of us are leery of maiden voyages. I had urgent business in New York, but when the booking clerk told me the only berths available for the next three

weeks were on *Titanic*, I turned around and went home without making the reservations. Cosmo had to talk me into it by agreeing to come along.”

Mairin must have still looked confused, for Miss Francatelli explained.

“*Titanic* hasn’t gone through her paces is all, although Captain Smith is the senior officer. White Star Line trusts him for the inaugural voyages. He’s retiring after this.”

“More’s the pity,” Mrs. Duff Gordon said. “I do like his calm manner. I can relax when I know he’s at the helm.”

While the two women continued to discuss White Star management, Mairin finished signing the confession book. She put that her favorite food was salmon, her most treasured possession was her pearl necklace, and she wished to visit the Great Barrier Reef.

Before the two women could start analyzing her again, Edwin returned with an older gentleman.

“I found your husband.” Edwin bowed slightly.

A handsome man with dark hair and a thin mustache smiled generously.

“Thayer wouldn’t let me get away, but I’m here now.” He looked inquisitively at Mairin, and Mrs. Duff Gordon introduced them.

Cosmo clapped his hands. “Now, what game is it tonight?”

“Auction Bridge.”

Mairin shook her head at Edwin. Didn’t he understand any signals she was trying to send to him? Zale would have noticed and declined playing this game right from the start.

“I’m sorry,” Mairin spoke up, “but we have to be moving on.”

“But we still need a fourth. Mr. Jespersen, you two could play as one so Miss Mairin can learn the rules.”

Mairin shook her head. “I ought to get some of that good sea air before retiring. I’m still adjusting.” Mairin made the excuse she’d heard a woman give near Zale’s group. Mairin had been trying not to listen to the energetic school of fish gathered around the triton guard, but her attention kept

getting pulled that way. She couldn’t help herself. If she was to continue her task, she needed to put some space between herself and Zale.

“You heard what the lady said,” Edwin intervened as Mrs. Duff Gordon tried to talk them into staying. “We’ll see you tomorrow. Have a good evening.”

“Thank you for that.” Edwin bent low to her ear as they headed to the exit. “My stomach isn’t quite settled yet. I think I’m the one who needs one more day to adjust.”

Edwin wheeled her past Zale’s table, and Zale never even looked her way. He was too busy swapping cards with the pretty brunette sitting to his right.

Not even noticing Zale, Edwin continued. “I hope you didn’t feel abandoned back there. It took some time to convince Mr. Duff Gordon to leave the smoking lounge.”

Mairin thought about how the women had waited for him to leave before pointing out Cecily’s dress. “It was fine. We talked fashion. It would have bored you.”

“It’s true that I know little about fashion. I generally cover the business sector for the paper.”

“And how are you finding travel on *Titanic*?” she asked as the cold air hit her face. She breathed deeply of the briny waves. Just what she needed to clear her head. She was starting to get confused back there. She focused all her attention on Edwin.

“As promised. It’s a luxury ship unlike any other. I spent some time in second and third classes today, and second-class accommodations are equal to first class on other ships. White Star boasts that on *Titanic*, all classes are given bedding and meal service whereas normally, especially in third class, passengers would have to bring their own blankets and food. Everyone is quite thrilled. What say you?”

Mairin looked down the length of the deck where people wrapped in wool coats strode in small groups. Lights poured out of the windows and lit up the night so that it was difficult for her to view the sea clearly. She turned away from the light so she could see the millions of stars in the night sky. “I’m still making up my mind.”

“You’re a tough customer. I will tell you that we won’t be able to go back to a regular ship after traveling on this one. We’ll be spoiled forevermore.”

“I suppose.” Mairin grew quiet. Her heart just wasn’t extending to her mind. She couldn’t think of a thing she wanted to say to Edwin to try to win him over. If she let the night go on like this, it would be their last together.

She needed to regroup. And as Neme always said, *leave them wanting more*. “If you wouldn’t mind, I really am ready to retire. We’ll have to examine the ship some more in the daylight.” She told Edwin her cabin number.

“We’re on the same side, though I’m one deck below you.”

Mairin let him chatter amiably on the way. She couldn’t understand her feelings. She had a job to do. Edwin had turned out to be a kind and

generous soul. He was willingly spending time alone with her. Why did she have this wisp of a feeling that something was not quite right?

CHAPTER 17

M airin slipped into the thick cotton nightgown Miss Higgins had set out for her. That was the third outfit Mairin had worn that day. Human girls led complicated lives. Undersea, her scales covered her in all the places clothing here did. There was no need to change, aside from the shells on their tails that the young mermaids liked to wear.

There was a light knock at the door and Zale whispered, “Mairs?”

Her pulse quickened as she let him in. She had thought he would spend the night entertaining his new friends in the lounge.

“I’ve got a surprise for you.” Zale wiggled his eyebrows as he bent down to take hold of her wheelchair.

“Wait, now?” She held up her hand to stop him.

The corridors were empty, with everyone slipping off to their rooms for the night.

“Now is best.”

“I’m surprised you’re even talking to me. Seems like you were busy holding court tonight.”

Zale’s gaze met hers. “Did that bother you?”

Mairin pictured Zale in the midst of three eager young women and smiled widely. “Not in the least. You go ahead and satisfy whatever

curiosity you have with the humans while I try to protect our kingdom.”

She faltered in her speech, wondering just how curious Zale was. If all mermaids regained their full freedoms, would Zale and the others want to visit with the humans? Would others be tempted?

“Just come out with me.”

“I’m in a prime location for monitoring Edwin. His room is slightly below mine and to the right, and if I focus my hearing, I’ll know when he opens his door.”

“The man is sleeping. He’ll not move until morning.”

“And if he does?”

“He’ll not want to find you hovering outside his cabin. That would send the wrong message. Besides, we have to go now. What I’m about to show you gets used during the day, and I’d much prefer we have it to ourselves.”

He wheeled her out and closed the door.

“At least tell me where you’re taking me.”

“Then it wouldn’t be a surprise. Give me some credit, Mairs. I know what you like.” He wheeled her down the empty corridor.

She had no idea what Zale could possibly think she would like on this human ship. He brought her to the elevator, and they went down as far as it would go to E-deck near the bottom of the ship.

After exiting, he wheeled her to the stairs and stopped. “We have to go down one more level.” He bent down and lifted the wheelchair, but stumbled when he took a step.

She gripped the chair, and he set her back down.

“Sorry, Mairs. I’ll have to bring the chair down first and then come back for you.”

“Human legs are wobbly, aren’t they?” she joked, surprised that Zale would stumble under her weight. Maybe he wasn’t as strong out of the water. That would hurt his pride. She rose and leaned against the wall.

A shadow passed over his face. “Still getting used to them.” He was tight-lipped as he took the chair.

Not waiting for him to come back, she forced herself to follow him.

Surely, if he could endure the pain, so could she. The cutting sensation came fast and hot. She practically ran down the stairs to get it over with.

“What are you doing?” Zale met her halfway.

“Let me finish.” She hopped over the last step and collapsed back into the chair, grateful for the human invention. She avoided Zale’s gaze as he joined her. As a sea princess she was used to showing strength and courage even when she didn’t feel strong inside. What did he think of her display of weakness above-sea?

They continued down another hallway and the rumble of the engines reverberated through her skin to her bones. It made her nervous to be so near the power that drove this great beast of a ship.

“The scent of water is strong here,” she said. “We’re under the surface, aren’t we? Undersea, but dry. How strange.”

Zale laughed. “That’s an understatement coming from the mermaid with legs.”

“Oh, stop. I don’t know how to talk to you when you’re like this.”

Zale took several furtive glances before opening the next door. “A steward told me he’d leave the door unlocked. He said they were all so busy figuring out their jobs that tonight would be the best night to get away with this.”

“Get away with what? Zale, tell me now.”

They entered a dark room with shapes hard to describe, but Zale kept going until they reached another door. Mairin heard water lapping behind this door, and her heart beat faster in response. “You’re not putting me back in

the ocean.” Her voice was stern. “Don’t make me command you as your princess.”

Zale took his hand off the handle. “Really?”

She knew how he hated when she or Kai pulled rank. His reaction revealed that he hadn’t intended to coax her back into the ocean. “I’m sorry.

It’s just the feeling of seawater is so strong here.” Being this close to water, her mermaid blood pumped into her legs, making them prickle in pain.

“Now this, you’re going to love.” Zale pushed open the last door into a room where dancing light caressed the walls. “The ship has a swimming bath.” A large rectangular pool filled the room, lined with the same white tiles outlined in blue as those in her en suite.

Water sloshed ever so gently with the movement of the ship, teasing her to dive in. The air hung thick with salt water, and it filled her senses. Her legs itched like they were covered with sand. “Oh,” she gasped out. “Get me in there now.”

“Gladly.”

He lifted her out of the chair and set her down on the water’s edge.

Mairin cooled her burning feet in the water. She moaned. “That feels so good! Zale, join me.” But immediately her toes began to grow scales, up to her ankles, and now at her knees. She cried out and scooted back. “No, no, no. My mission isn’t over. I need my legs. He’ll never accept me with a tail.”

She found a nearby towel and dried her scales as fast as she could. They began to disappear and her human legs returned. “Zale, you did that on purpose.” She glared at him.

“Honest, Mairs, I didn’t know that would happen. I thought we could just swim like they do.” His forehead wrinkled. “What did you mean, he’ll

never accept you with a tail? He doesn't need to accept you for you to keep him alive."

"I know that." She looked under the towel and was relieved to see that all trace of her scales had gone. "But if I can stay close to him, I'll better be able to keep him alive, now won't I?"

He studied her hard. She looked away.

"Fine." He stripped off his shirt and dove into the water.

"No, Zale! What if you don't turn back? I didn't get far into the water before I dried my scales off. Quick, get out."

Ignoring her, he dived to the bottom.

When he surfaced, she began to lecture him. "How do I explain a merman in the pool? I couldn't possibly get you back into the ocean myself."

"Too late, now. Mairin, those legs were killing me."

"Feel good?" she asked, unable to hide her jealousy.

"You know it does." He floated with his arms behind his back, the water lapping gently against his tail as his great fins spread out.

She looked at the tiles where he'd been standing and there was blood all over them. She gasped. "Zale, your feet are bleeding."

He swam to the edge and splashed water, diluting the red stain. "Yours aren't?"

She shook her head.

"I've never been more grateful for your father's physical training than now. You should see what he puts us through. Really separates the tritons from the rest."

“I’m sorry. You never should have followed me.” He put up a good show of not being in pain, but that blood told a different story.

The sound of the water, the droplets that soaked into her arms, the humidity in the room, all that water affected Mairin. She licked her lips. She craved the water.

Zale was doing this on purpose, tempting her to give in and join him.

She shored up her resolve. She couldn’t risk losing her legs.

“I should get back to my room.” She forced herself up on her feet, enduring the sharp sensation of knife cuts as she made her way to the wheelchair.

“Let me help.” Zale hopped up on the edge of the swimming bath and toweled off his tail. As he did so, his feet peeked out under the white towel.

“I wondered. When wet, we have tails, when dry, we’ve got legs.” He turned his ocean-blue eyes onto Mairin before slipping back into the swimming bath.

Underneath the water, his tail unfurled in glorious metallic colors. He swam around and around the water, creating a swirling whirlpool. Zale spun around in his own creation, shooting water like a fountain out of his mouth.

He called out, “Mairs, dive in!”

She looked nervously around. “What if someone sees you?”

“It’s closed right now. None of the passengers are going to come. The women have from ten till one and the men from two until six. And even then, they have to go buy a ticket from the Enquiry Office way up on C-deck. No one will think to go swimming now. We’re alone. Join me.”

“Prove to me one more time that my legs will come back.”

He easily obliged, his arms flexing as he pushed himself out of the water and dried off with a towel. He wiggled his toes, poking out of the towel. “Ugly things, aren’t they?”

She laughed. “Yours are. Mine are quite dainty.” She shoved her foot playfully under his nose.

“Ha!” He hesitated for a second before reaching out and caressing her toes. “That’s one thing I agree with. Yours are lovely.” He gave her a mischievous grin, and before she could react, he pulled her leg to him and in one swoop she was in the water.

She gulped in surprise and got a mouthful of water. At first, her lungs protested, but as she transformed, her lungs eagerly accepted the water. Her legs shivered with pleasure at the feel of water surrounding them. “Oh, Zale. This feels amazing. The humans don’t know what they’re missing living on land the way they do.”

In no time, her tail unfurled and her beautiful scales covered her vulnerable body, making her feel invincible again. Thankful that she’d already changed into the simple nightgown, she pulled the wet cloth over her head.

“I don’t mean to say I told you so, but…” Zale dove under and chased her around the swimming bath.

Mairin laughed underwater as she darted away from him. “It’s not home, but it sure brings relief.” She scooted just fast enough to stay out of his grasp.

Zale switched direction and met her in the middle. He scooped her up in his arms and Mairin was so happy, she flung her arms around his neck.

Flesh against flesh, she suddenly became very aware of Zale as they both breathed heavily from the swim. His muscular triton build, the water dripping down his neck, the closeness of his chin, his mouth. She swallowed and pushed away, but his arms held her fast.

“Don’t do it, Mairin. You don’t belong here. Let me take you home.”

He’d caught her quite off guard, and she found she’d lost her voice. His ocean-blue eyes looked genuinely concerned for her. No teasing. No jealousy.

Her pulse raced as she realized the effect Zale was having on her. He was more than her brother's friend, and he wasn't just another triton guard.

He was very much an attractive merman whom she could no longer deny was someone she liked. Very much.

"I can't," she whispered.

"Can't or won't?"

He bent his head closer, and she turned away to avoid his kiss. She wanted to kiss him, but she couldn't cross that line. How could she kiss Zale when she was supposed to be luring a human into love? She only hoped Zale would understand and still be there for her when her mission was over and they were free. She could tell him to wait for her, but it wasn't

fair to make him watch her pretend to fall in love with someone else. It would be better for him not to know her true feelings.

He let go, and she dropped down into the water. "We should go," he said, his voice monotone. He got out of the swimming bath while she sat at the bottom hating herself. She stayed there for a long time, hoping that by the time she got out he would be gone. But she knew he wouldn't. He would continue to protect her even after she'd rejected him. That was Zale.

She slowly floated to the top and swam to the edge where they'd left the towels.

"I put a robe on your chair. Do you need help to get out?" Zale stood near the door, dressed in human clothes, his arms crossed.

She shook her head, still unable to speak. Something had shifted between them, and it scared her. She'd always taken Zale for granted and perhaps suspected he might be interested in her. But now, after she'd hurt him so?

"Then I'll wait for you in here." The door closed.

How long could Zale watch her throw herself at a human before he gave up on her and went home?

Mairin pulled herself out of the swimming bath and dried off. As her tail split into legs, she refrained from crying out. It hurt less than her heart splitting in two. She couldn’t help but wonder if losing Zale would be the cost of her freedom.

CHAPTER 18

F or most of the night, Mairin stared out the open porthole in her stateroom. The scent of the ocean calmed her rushing thoughts.

Life above-sea was not what she expected. Zale shouldn't have followed her. He was ruining everything by making her focus on the wrong things.

She wanted to focus on freeing her people, but her night with Zale replayed over and over in her mind. From the almost-kiss to the stiff manner in which he opened the door to her stateroom and wheeled her back in. They didn't talk the whole way from the pool, back through the dark room filled with odd-shaped lounge chairs, through the long corridors, and up the elevator.

By morning, she'd decided she had to tell him what she was really doing. He probably wouldn't agree with her plans, but he might understand.

Zale didn't feel the same way about humans as she did. He hadn't lived in the Little Mermaid's shadow his whole life.

A knock at the door sounded, followed by Miss Higgins's voice. "Room service."

"Come in." Mairin pushed herself to a sitting position as the door opened.

"Good morning," the stewardess said brightly. Her uniform appeared freshly starched and ironed. "Here's your tea and fruit."

"Thank you, Miss Higgins."

The stewardess set the tray on the table before looking closely at Mairin. "Oh, my. Are you feeling all right? You look like you've not slept all night. Do you need to see the doctor?" She made a motion as if to rush out the door.

"No, not the doctor."

“Tell you what. I’ll come back to check on you once I’ve delivered all the trays. I’m almost done. You’re allowed to eat in bed, so take it slow. It’s meant to settle your stomach. A full breakfast is being served in the dining room if you want more.” The stewardess smiled as she eased out the door.

Tea. She and Neme used to pretend they were having English tea parties in Miss Pearl’s garden. Pearl collected china from shipwrecks and used it to decorate her flower beds. They’d fill the cups with different colors of dirt to imitate what they thought tea looked like.

Feeling fancy, Mairin poured herself a cup of the hot liquid. She stirred in a little sugar and cream before taking a sip. *Mmm*. Delicious. Tea might be her new favorite thing above-sea. If only she could enjoy it more, but her insides were still tied up in knots over Zale.

By the time the stewardess returned, Mairin had finished her cup of tea and eaten all the strawberries on the plate. They were also delicious. With all these pleasures, it was easy for her to allow herself to get distracted from hard thinking. Maybe that was what the human problem was. They had too many luxuries to distract them from deeper thoughts.

“You’re looking heaps better,” Miss Higgins said. She came in with a water pitcher and set it down on the table. “Want me to pick you out something from the singer’s closet?”

“Would you?” Mairin hadn’t gone looking through Cecily’s things yet.

The stewardess opened the wardrobe and flipped through the colorful dresses hanging inside. Satisfied, she pulled out a pale-yellow tailor-made.

“Here, put this on, and I’ll change the water for these lovely flowers.” She took both the pitcher of water and flowers into the bathroom.

The dress was made from a similar material to the one she wore yesterday, with the addition of dusty-rose ribbon trimmings and tiny beads like pearls sewn to the fabric.

Mairin wiggled into the new dress, enduring the pain in her legs as she put weight on them. What would Mrs. Duff Gordon have to say about this dress? It was definitely a dress Cecily would wear. Light and carefree.

Almost flowerlike. The type of dress for making a human fall in love.

There was a shuffling outside the door, followed by Zale's quiet voice.

"Mairs?"

Mairin froze. She hadn't been sure he would see her today, if ever.

Maybe he came to tell her he was leaving. Taking a deep breath, she wheeled over and opened the door.

"Most people knock," she blurted out in a nervous attempt to cover her true feelings.

He raised an eyebrow. Today he wore a tailored navy suit jacket with a white shirt and black tie, pilfered from another unsuspecting man. His hair was still wet, like he just come from another swim. "May I?"

Mairin backed away to give him space.

"Here we go." Miss Higgins entered the room with freshly arranged flowers. She stopped when she saw Zale. "Excuse me, I spilled a little water." She popped back into the en suite.

Zale closed the door to the hallway and then checked out the tea tray.

"Did you eat all the strawberries?" he asked, picking through Mairin's dishes. "Apparently having them this time of year is a treat, *especially at sea*." His voice took on an English accent.

"Sorry, I did. They were too good not to eat." Mairin watched him deliberately avoid eye contact. "Did you want to go to one of the dining

rooms for breakfast?" She reached for Cecily's hat that was on the bed. If he was going to pretend nothing had changed, she would pretend, too.

“I’ll take you wherever you need to go and leave you to do whatever it is you’re doing. But I won’t stay and watch you. In fact—”

There was a knock at the door, and Mairin pointed. “See? People knock.” She was glad at the interruption, as it seemed Zale had also done some thinking overnight. Assuming it was another *Titanic* employee needing access to the room, she started for the door.

“Cecily?” came Charles’s muffled voice.

Mairin stopped and opened her eyes wide at Zale.

“I’m here to take you to breakfast.”

“I’ll be down later,” Mairin called out, mimicking the singer’s voice.

“There are some people I want you to meet. Hurry up.”

“I’m…” Mairin glanced around the stateroom, looking for an excuse.

Her gaze landed on the dresser filled with Cecily’s belongings. “I’m dressing. You know how long that takes. Go without me.”

“Fine. But don’t take too long.”

“*Phew.* ” Mairin let out a relieved sigh and plunked Cecily’s hat on her head. She whispered to Zale. “There. I’m finished dressing.”

“Can’t you be done with this charade?” Zale whispered, his gaze carefully watching for the stewardess beyond the door to the bathroom.

“I’ve survived one night without Charles finding me.” She adjusted the brim. *How long could she survive the day avoiding him?* “That’s more than I hoped for.”

Miss Higgins returned with the flowers and exchanged them for the empty tea tray. “Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“Yes, thank you. When you leave, look down the hall and tell me if Charles is gone.”

“Of course.” With a nod to Zale, she exited the room and scanned the hallway left and right. “No sign of him. I suspect he’s hungry and has no

patience to wait for a young woman to get ready.” The stewardess left with a glance at Zale and a look aimed at Mairin that implied she’d want details later.

Zale turned his back to the open door and frowned. “I hoped that after a night’s rest you’d have come to your senses.”

He didn’t raise his voice. He wasn’t starting an argument. Mairin wished he would so she could spar back. She was about to tell him everything about her plan when a familiar steward strutted past the open door, pausing long enough to meet her gaze and shake his head slowly.

The finman! What was he doing on board?

Mairin blinked, and he was gone. How did he know she was about to tell Zale everything? She adjusted her hat one last time and looked Zale in the eye. “My senses have never left me. Now, if you’re done lecturing, take me past the windows in the first-class dining room so Charles sees the hat.”

Then she’d best find out what the finman wanted.

S

C

P

, Mairin shoved Cecily’s hat under the

travel rug she’d taken from the singer’s room. The weather was either a smidge cooler than yesterday, or she was feeling more human all the time.

She pressed her toe on the floor and pain shot up her leg. Still enough mermaid in her that her legs felt unnatural. That was one good thing about the pain.

She was slightly worried the hat would be crushed under the heavy blanket, but it wouldn’t do for Charles to see it while she was eating and couldn’t make a quick getaway. Having access to Cecily’s room and belongings was too convenient to have to give up now. Besides, how could she continue with Edwin if she had to scurry around the ship like Zale was doing?

“How are you passing off as human so easily?” she asked as Zale casually nodded at someone. If she didn’t know better, she wouldn’t suspect him of a thing, the way he blended in.

“I’m just being me, only with legs.”

Like it was that easy. Mairin felt like she stuck out like a narwhal amid a pod of dolphins, and everyone knew she was out of place. An outsider.

“If I can’t talk you out of this, how can I help speed things along?” Zale said, fidgeting with a knife. “I’d like to get home soon. It’s not good for us to be gone this long.”

Mairin examined the menu. When she hadn’t seen Edwin in the dining room, she’d talked Zale into eating with her. Food always calmed him. The menu listed baked apples, eggs, and buckwheat cakes among other items. “I can’t leave until someone replaces me. Probably my aunt Sapphire. I’m taking her place while she’s helping my mother.”

“Was that so hard? You can trust me with your secrets, Mairs.

Especially out here where it’s just us.”

After the waiter returned, they both ordered Findon haddock, and Mairin requested watercress to go with it. If it came from water, it must be good, she reasoned.

Alone again, Zale leaned forward. “And if that’s the case, that we’re waiting for your aunt to replace you, we may as well have fun, right? You can dally with that glowing human, and I’ll spend some time getting to know one or two of these females better.” He pointedly looked at an especially pretty brunette at the table next to theirs before he met Mairin’s gaze over the bouquet of forget-me-nots on the table. “For scientific reasons, of course.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Of course.”

W

by the barber shop, Zale leaned in for a closer look at a man getting shaved. “Just a minute,” he said as he left her in the hall. “I need to know what to do with these whiskers that keep growing on my face.”

Mairin remained at the entrance, looking at the toys for sale that hung from the ceiling. A sailor doll, various balls, and a stuffed dog.

The ever-present finman found her. “Why aren’t you with the human prince?” he asked.

“He’s not a prince. And he’s busy this morning.” She turned in the chair to see him better. “Why don’t you want me talking to Zale about our plans?”

“Simple. He’ll talk you out of it. His priorities are not ours.” He looked up at Zale with an unreadable expression. “Focus on the task, little mermaid. Don’t let the humans dictate to you. They can be so selfish.

Remember, it’s because of them we’re not allowed up here. Find a way to be with the prince.”

“I’m trying, but there are etiquette rules in this world.”

“Since when did you become a rule follower? If you want to be fully mermaid again, you must complete your task. If we let time unfold on its own, we’ll both be at the end of our lifespans when we’re allowed to surface freely.”

He held out a small brown square to her. “This should help. Taste it.”

Mairin hesitated. Moab rolled his eyes and popped it into his mouth. He smiled as he devoured the object. “Nothing in the sea is this good.” He produced another.

Curious, Mairin took the square this time. She licked it, but it tasted of nothing, though the smell was tempting.

“If you don’t want the chocolate, I’ll take it.” The finman reached for it.

Chocolate? Mairin shoved the piece into her mouth and bit down. A sweet and somewhat bitter taste exploded in her mouth. It was as wonderful

as she’d been led to believe. The finman was right. She couldn’t go her entire life not being able to sample life above-sea. Mairin had to bring some back to Miss Pearl, so when she awoke, she could have it.

“Excellent. Now that you’ve been given the power of the siren, let’s wrap this up, shall we?” The finman crossed his arms.

“What are you talking about? Mermaids aren’t like sirens. We can’t trick men with our voices.”

“You really should be more discerning about what you eat, princess.

The sea witch is clever in how she provides her potions.”

Mairin almost gagged. “The chocolate. You put something in it.”

The finman nodded, a satisfied grin on his face. “That’s right, princess.

Concentrate on what’s important, and you’ll have that human doing your bidding before we land in New York. You’ve got a siren’s voice. I find it more effective than a finwife’s screech. Now use it.”

Zale noticed the finman, and he abruptly left off talking with the barber and came their way. The finman spun around and as he walked away, he turned his head and mouthed, “Or else.”

Insufferable. Once they’d won their freedom, she hoped to never see him again.

CHAPTER 19

Z ale scowled at the finman's retreating back. "What did he want?"

"He was checking up on me."

Zale studied her face long and hard. Mairin could tell he wanted to say more but was biting back his words. There was no way she was going to tell him about the siren's voice. Zale would have her back in the ocean in a heartbeat. She hoped he couldn't read in her expression how scared she was. The sirens were dangerous creatures, and now she had their voice. The destruction she could cause with it!

Finally, Zale said, "Where can I drop you off? The gymnasium opens for the men in the afternoon, so you can have me until then."

"Oh, Zale!" one of the young women from Zale's card party descended on him like a remora fish. "We're meeting for shuffleboard. Can you join us?"

With barely a hesitation, he said, "Sure, I'll just get my sister situated and be right there." He gave the human girl an oversized grin meant to make a point to Mairin, she was sure.

"Oh, she's your sister! Hello. I'm Valerie." The human girl nodded her greeting.

"Nice to meet you." Mairin made her voice as haughty and disinterested as any she'd heard aboard. Thankfully, she detected no trace of a siren's

voice. *How long before it took affect?*

"See you soon, Zale." The young woman bounced away, tossing a smile over her shoulder.

"Your sister?" Mairin gasped after the effusive girl left. "Zale, are you lying to these young women?"

“We’re doing what’s easy, aren’t we?” he said. “Saying you’re my sister clears up a whole lot of confusion. I can go to your room without ruining your reputation or having us become part of the onboard gossip. I should think you’d thank me. Those girls seem to know everything about everyone.

Besides, I can’t very well tell them I’m a walking merman, can I?”

His stare made Mairin uncomfortable, but she pushed ahead anyway.

“I’m telling people you are my chauffeur. Now we have competing stories.”

“My story makes more sense since it describes our relationship. If I was your chauffeur, we’d be in danger of developing feelings for each other.

This way, we’re not. We’re each free to…to play shuffleboard if we want.”

Mairin slumped in her chair. He was so irritatingly right. “If your new friend was polite, she would have invited your *sister* to play this shuffleboard.”

Zale shrugged. “Her mind isn’t on shuffleboard.”

On land or undersea, Zale attracted female attention the way sea lettuce attracts manatees. She refrained from replying with a sarcastic comment and instead gave him a sweet smile. “Then take me to one of the rooms with books.”

Given Edwin was a newspaper man, it seemed likely that he might end up in a room like that. And if she had to wait somewhere, it was the room she’d most like to be in. Besides, putting her focus back on what it should be on—Edwin—would save her from having to watch shuffleboard, whatever that was.

Zale wheeled her from the dining room to the elevator. Up to the lounge. The room was brighter in the daytime, with all the windows looking

out over the water. No one was playing cards this morning, but several people were scattered throughout, reading or talking quietly. He wheeled

her around the elegant tables and chairs until she was before the large mahogany book shelf. He opened one of the glass doors.

“There you are. Books.” Zale bowed. “Am I dismissed?”

He was being impossible. “Enjoy playing shuffleboard,” she said sweetly.

Mairin didn’t like how she and Zale were at odds, but what could she do about it? Her pride would not allow her to follow him around like a duckling while she waited for Edwin to be available to have his heart won over.

So, here she was in front of a bookshelf looking for answers, or at least looking for a distraction.

For obvious reasons, books were impractical in her kingdom. Though they did have books that dropped to the sea from shipwrecks, most knowledge was passed down orally from the elders. Miss Pearl had spent more time teaching Mairin about the human world than she taught the other young merpeople. Did that mean Miss Pearl suspected that one day another sea princess would go above-sea?

And what would Mairin’s mother say if she saw her today? Or last night, playing cards in a library with a human male? *Or with the voice of a siren*. Mairin couldn’t rebel more if she had set out to do everything she was told not to do. How could she explain how one decision just led naturally to the next, and she couldn’t stop now if she wanted to?

Mairin blinked her dry eyes and refocused on the books. Miss Pearl’s collection included such random topics as a book on housekeeping, another on modern farming methods, and a child’s picture book about birds. There were so many more options here, and all in mint condition. None were water-logged or missing pages.

After Mairin had pulled several selections, the finman walked into the room. Mairin’s skin prickled. She deliberately turned her back on Moab and continued to study the spines of the books. He was as bad as her mother and her guards back home. She thought life above-sea meant freedom, but she

was realizing she still wasn't completely free. Her legs limited her, and the finman proved to be quite demanding.

She slid out a book called *Pilgrim's Progress,* a book that fit well in the hand, brown cover with a gold-embossed title and crisp, new pages that glittered with gold on their edges. Oxford Edition.

She opened it to a frightful drawing of a winged beast with an arrow in its fist attacking a man on a narrow road. Beneath, a caption read *APOLLYON FALLS UPON CHRISTIAN (SEE PAGE 72)*. Eagerly, Mairin flipped to page seventy-two. There was another picture, only this time it looked as if the man was driving the beast back. *THE FLIGHT OF*

APOLLYON. She read:

CHR. All this is true, and much more, which thou hast left out; but the Prince whom I serve and honour, is merciful, and ready to forgive: but besides, these infirmities possessed me in thy Country, for there I suckt them in, and I have groaned under them, been sorry for them, and have obtained pardon of my Prince.

APOL. Then Apollyon broke out into a grievous rage, saying, I am an Enemy to this Prince: I hate his Person, his Laws, and People: I am come out on purpose to withstand thee.

Mairin looked up from the book. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched the finman randomly work around the room. Did no one else notice the strange steward? People ordered tea from him, but he never brought it. And he handed out tea to people who never asked for any. She turned back to the book. The finman reminded her of this Apollyon, only

not quite as frightening. The finman was more slick and scary than domineering and frightening.

"Could you move faster, princess?" the finman whispered, handing her a hot cup of tea. "He's over there." The finman pointed to the corner of the room.

The way the light filtered through the window gave everyone a glow, so she'd missed him.

"He just walked in. You really should pay him closer attention."

"Thank you," she said coolly, setting the hot tea on the closest table.

"Did you want something else?"

"No, just checking on your progress."

"I work better alone," she said, with more bravado than she felt.

He held up his hands and backed away. Then, as an afterthought, he came closer and bent down low. "Do you need my help with that bodyguard you've brought along? If you work better alone?" He punched his clenched fist into the palm of his other hand.

Mairin kept her face calm, a skill learned after years of subtle jabs from her peers and confrontations with the queen. "He's useful for getting me around this ship. If you hadn't made my legs so painful, I wouldn't need his help." She inwardly cringed at her description of Zale, thankful that he wasn't around to overhear her.

"You'd better turn up the heat, soon. We're headed into cooler waters, the sea witch's territory. She's going to want an update. And if she's not happy, none of us are happy."

Mairin put the book in her lap while she wheeled herself to Edwin. She wanted to hurry up herself, just so she could get rid of the annoying finman.

Edwin had found a cozy corner looking out at the promenade deck and the ocean beyond. He sat at a table where he wrote on the papers scattered before him.

"What are you writing?"

He looked up from his work. "Oh, Miss Mairin. Hello there. How are you this morning? I'm working on notes for my article. There are so many

directions I can take." He put down his pencil. "What are you reading?"

Mairin looked at the cover and said, "The Pilgrim's Progress."

"Ah yes, *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to that Which is to Come…*"

She flipped to the first page with the complete title and continued it for him "*THE MANNER OF HIS SETTING OUT, HIS DANGEROUS*

JOURNEY, AND SAFE ARRIVAL AT THE DESIRED COUNTRY." She set the book back in her lap. "It's quite a title."

"It's quite a book," he said.

"You've read it?" She wondered if her voice sounded any different to Edwin. A siren's voice was like music underlying a siren's words, imperceptible, but oh, so deadly. Mairin assumed it was something she could turn on and off, but the unwanted gift wasn't something that came with instructions. She studied his eyes for any sign of infatuation.

"It's been a while, and I most likely skimmed it. The language is dated, but the story is good. Let's hope we survive our dangerous journey and arrive safe in our desired country." He chuckled.

Mairin nodded. He spoke more truth than he realized. She was thinking about herself, but then for a moment, she wondered if *she* was dangerous to Edwin. Ignoring that thought, she flipped open to the Apollyon drawing.

"Can you tell me what this is?"

"That beast is part dragon, bear, bird, and fish, symbolizing that he draws his power from all the elements of fire, earth, wind, and water."

Across the room, the finman mouthed, "Use your voice."

"I don't like him," Mairin said. Her mermaid voice was not a siren's call, and she didn't want it to be.

Edwin chuckled. “You have good instincts. He is trying to exert his power and take control of dear Christian there. He wants Christian to stay

worldly and not seek God.” Edwin scratched his chin. “The book is full of symbolism. Seems a weighty read for traveling on a luxury ocean liner.”

“How long do you think it’ll take me to read it?”

“Several days. They let you check it out and take it back to your room.

If you change your mind, you can always return and select another. They stocked the bookshelves with classics and new books, too.”

“Thank you. I will choose a couple.”

“I love books, too, and plan to get my fill in before we get to New York.”

His eyes twinkled as if he and Mairin had shared something important.

If she loved books like that, they would have shared a moment, but since she was more curious than enamored of books, she merely nodded in agreement. Edwin’s whole life revolved around words. She’d have to tread carefully, so he wouldn’t learn how little she knew about above-sea life.

Mairin studied the way he looked at her and wondered how much in love he’d need to be before the barrier was broken. She’d overheard a young woman about her age describe her feelings about a young man on board as puppy love, an amusement for the voyage. Or did Edwin need to fall deeply in love, the way Cecily had described her own feelings for this Paul of hers, such that he would change all his plans for her?

Her doubts about agreeing to manipulate Edwin grew the more time she spent with him. Or, rather, they grew the more time she spent with Zale.

Zale grounded her in the kingdom. If he wasn’t here as a constant reminder of…of what? Truth? Morality? She wouldn’t be questioning her actions right now, that what she was doing wasn’t right. It felt false, and she didn’t like that feeling.

She had been sent to protect Edwin, and by partnering with Moab, she still was protecting him, only differently than what her family had in mind.

How did she get herself into this mess? She'd always boasted how she wasn't foolish like the Little Mermaid, but now she was in a conundrum of

her own choosing.

If she was offered another way to free her people, she would take it.

She wished Edwin was a different sort of man. His kindness interfered with her conscience. She had to remember that human hearts were fickle, and he would get over whatever heartache she left behind. Besides, Moab had evil intentions toward Edwin, so really, it was for Edwin's own good that he fall in love with a mermaid. But the way things were going, she was the wrong mermaid for the task.

"Did you want to play shuffleboard today?" She tried to copy the lilt in her voice to sound like the girl who had drawn Zale's attention, but instead, she felt the siren voice trying to get out. She closed off her throat before it could escape.

"Oh, I don't know that I'll have time for that." He packed up his papers.

"I'll leave you to get started on that book. We could meet for dinner later.

I've got some interviews with the crew and then I'd like to get more thoughts from you as a first-timer."

"That would be wonderful." Mairin smiled as alluringly as she knew how, but it might have come out more like a grimace. She'd felt another twinge on her tongue as she spoke, as if the siren voice was making a new attempt to speak.

Instead of looking besotted at her attempts to ensnare him, Edwin's face scrunched up. "If you don't mind trying another restaurant, would it be okay if we ate in the second-class dining room this time? I won't be

offended if you say no. I need to try a variety of the ship’s offerings and everyone always wants to read about the food.”

“Yes, that’s fine.” Mairin had no idea why he would think she’d not want to eat in another room, but Edwin looked relieved that she’d agreed.

“I was hoping you’d say that. Let’s meet at the grand staircase after the bugle sounds, and I’ll take you down.”

Disappointed that she’d failed to make immediate plans with Edwin, she settled in near a window where she could look out over her beloved ocean and read. There would be time yet to do things her way.

She glared back at the finman, who was staring at her from across the room. She didn’t like to be handled so. It was only her second day above-sea, and she wanted to make a point. Mairin was a sea princess and wouldn’t be pressured to do what the sea witch wanted in the time she wanted it.

Besides, if the siren voice was as potent as they said, she could use it as a last resort. Her stomach soured just thinking about using it. She didn’t want any part of a siren, known for luring men to their deaths. The finman didn’t care how they won their freedom, but she did.

CHAPTER 20

Z ale hadn’t appeared to wheel her to lunch, so by the time she needed to get ready for dinner, she was starving. After changing into the gown Miss Higgins had left out for her, Mairin made her way to the grand staircase on her own power.

The dinner outfit left out for her paired a pale pink satin skirt with a pale blue tunic embroidered with silver. The way the fabric moved reminded Mairin of the ocean. If Mrs. Duff Gordon saw her, the designer might approve of Mairin’s outfit, since she wore something that reflected who she was.

But with no Miss Higgins to help, Mairin had to figure out her hair on her own. In the ocean, she let it float how it wanted. Above-sea the women pulled and tucked and poofed their hair into pretty styles wide enough to support their hats. Cecily had a collection of *hair rats* to help with the style, but Mairin couldn’t quite seem to hide the braided wire sufficiently under her hair. She gave up and simply swooshed her hair up as best she could and locked it there with a multitude of combs and pins before covering it with one of Cecily’s smaller velvet hats.

Mairin didn’t mind doing things on her own. She wished she could walk like Zale, but after moving about in her stateroom, she welcomed the help of the wheelchair. Besides, with the chair, the humans didn’t seem to pay

her much attention as she moved among them. It was as if the chair made her invisible.

What bothered her more was that Zale had seemingly forgotten about her. *How friendly was he getting with the human girl? While Mairin was so close to getting their freedom back, his foolish actions might lock them all down again.*

“Everything all right?” Edwin said as he approached, probably noticing her scowl. He wasn’t wearing his tuxedo tonight, rather he wore a plain dinner

jacket and slacks. Mairin wondered if she'd overdressed this time.

How did these humans decide what to wear and when?

She brightened and replied, "I'm wonderful now that you're here." At the sound of her voice, a chill went down her spine. She'd used a tinge of the siren voice. *It just slipped out.* She didn't mean for it to happen. It was only a small musical undertone, but she knew it when it happened.

Edwin nodded and went around her to grab the handles of her chair. She couldn't see his reaction to the siren voice. How long did it take for the voice to take control? She glanced around the first-class passengers in their tuxedo suits and glittering gowns, looking for the finman, but he was not there.

The second-class dining room was on the same level as the first-class dining room, D-deck, but near the back where the motion of the ship was more noticeable. The oak-paneled room contained rows of rectangular tables laid with silverware and plates topped with napkins folded like sailboats. Mahogany chairs with crimson leather seat cushions were bolted to the floor and swiveled to allow passengers to sit.

Since Edwin couldn't move a chair out of the way for her, he held out his hands, palms up, like he planned to scoop her up. "Shall I assist you?"

he asked.

"Can't she sit at the head of the table?" said a woman Mairin had not yet been introduced to. She wore a white shirtwaist with a high neck and

long sleeves past her wrists. Her dark hair was pulled up in the pretty style of the other women, a long string of dark purple beads around her neck. She was young, mildly fashionable, but not ostentatious.

The steward who'd led them to the table nodded, and Edwin wheeled Mairin into place.

Introductions were made and the others all sat down. The woman who had come to her aid, Miss Annie Foster, sat to Mairin's left, and Edwin sat on the right. Eight people dined to a rectangular table. Their table was full, and Mairin didn't like sitting with so many humans at one time. It was one thing to move around with them on the ship where they paid her no mind, but here, they'd expect her to interact. She feared not fitting in. What would she say when conversation turned to land activities she only knew definitions of?

They all seemed to know one another, having dined together before.

One man, a widower by the name of John Harper, said he was on his way to preach at the Moody Church in Chicago and was bringing his daughter along. The six-year-old blinked silently at Mairin and for a moment, Mairin wondered if she was the human child she'd splashed her tail at in Southampton. It was hard to tell.

Beside them sat the girl's aunt and nursemaid. Another preacher and his wife completed the coterie.

"Miss Mairin and I met through a mutual friend," Edwin began. "It's a first voyage for both of us, so we've bonded in solidarity."

The way Edwin explained things like they were friends, made Mairin cringe slightly. She wasn't feeling particularly friendly as she tried to manipulate him, even if it was for his own good.

"You eventually get used to life aboard." Miss Foster turned her playful eyes to Mairin. "Although, compared to some trips I've made, this ship feels like a seaside hotel. Only a few days ago we stepped inside, and in a

few days more we'll step out at an entirely new location." As she reached for her napkin, she revealed weathered hands that were a sign of hard work.

"Do you travel often?" Mairin asked, curious about this woman who spoke with an air of quiet confidence.

"Not particularly. In fact, I haven't been to see my family in five years."

“Do you not like your family, to have been away for so long?” She wondered if Miss Foster was another human, like Cecily, who put her own desires above all else.

“My family is dear to me, but my calling is as a missionary. I live in India where I’ve started a school for girls. I already miss my students, but it’ll be wonderful to see my family again. My mother is ill, so I’m returning home.”

“I’m sorry to hear about your mother’s poor health.” Mairin’s thoughts returned to Miss Pearl and her own kingdom under siege by the finfolk.

“These girls you teach, did they not go to school before?” Someone was always trying to teach her something, whether Miss Pearl about above-sea lore or her mother about ruling a kingdom.

Miss Foster’s forehead wrinkled, like the subject troubled her. “A combination of factors has kept these girls out of school. Some parents don’t consider educating girls to be of importance, and those who do want to educate their girls either cannot afford it or don’t know how to go about it.”

“What did they do before you arrived?”

“The girls learned survival skills by doing. Gathering water, taking care of younger children, collecting firewood. But I started teaching them how to read and figure numbers. They are eager to learn. They will have so many more opportunities open to them. Our world is an amazing place, and they’ll be able to go out and explore it. I give them the tools.”

Two little girls at the table across from them began giggling, attracting Miss Foster’s attention. The mother spoke French to them, telling them to

eat their soup. The father, a man with darker skin than all of them, held a spoon out to the littlest one. When the girl looked up, Miss Foster smiled and waved at her.

“You remind me of a teacher back home.” Mairin said, her thoughts drifting to Miss Pearl, always so enthusiastic about life above-sea.

“Oh? Where is home for you?”

A steward placed a bowl of pea soup in front of each of them. But it was Miss Foster’s question that pulled Mairin back to the dinner and the people around her. She was glad she’d come across the map in front of the Purser’s Office. She’d studied it when she was alone, abandoned by Zale, and had to wheel herself to her cabin. There had been a group of men gathered nearby, noting the posted day’s run and discussing the bets they planned to make on the next day’s travel. All seemed hopeful for a fast run to New York.

The map itself showed where the oceans and land met. So much water compared to so little land. Her pride swelled at seeing the dominance of the water on the map. It was exciting to see and learn more about their place in the world. How would she have learned about maps if she’d stayed undersea her entire life? Miss Pearl might have a book with maps, but Mairin had never seen one.

Miss Foster waited for an answer. Mairin smiled and said, “Home is the North Sea.” What would Miss Foster think if Mairin told her that her home was an undersea kingdom that had existed for thousands of years? It was such an odd thing to look at one’s home from the outside and try to imagine how others saw it. *If they ever learned of its existence.*

“Must be beautiful.”

“My favorite place in the whole world.”

“India is mine. But sometimes you need to leave a place to appreciate it more, don’t you think?”

Edwin leaned in to join the conversation. “I appreciate land more than I ever have.” He tilted up his empty soup bowl. “I’m only now getting my

appetite back.”

Miss Foster laughed, and he smiled warmly at her.

Mairin looked at the two and became a little jealous. They were both unmarried, living on land. If it wasn't so important for her to make Edwin fall in love, she'd find a way to leave these two alone together. But since her purpose was to make Edwin fall in love with her, she intervened, turning to Edwin and engaging him in conversation that left Miss Foster out.

"What do you think of someone who doesn't have a soul?" she asked by way of testing Edwin's beliefs. Perhaps she needed to get more personal with him if he enjoyed Miss Foster's company so much.

"Excuse me?"

"No soul. What kind of person is that? While I was reading, I overheard a woman say that a particular man had no soul."

"Oh." He smiled in understanding. "It's an expression. It means the person is heartless."

"Without a heart? I'm not sure that clears things up for me."

Miss Foster interrupted. "Callous. Not caring about others."

Mairin nodded. "I see."

"Of course, they have a soul," Edwin continued. "But this man's is likely cold. Dead."

"A soul can die?"

Miss Foster set down her fork. "Are you a religious woman?"

Mairin dabbed at her mouth. How could she put this into words without confusing these humans? Mermaids did not have eternal souls. When they perished, they became sea foam. That was the whole reason her aunt wanted to become human. She'd famously said she "would gladly give all

the years I have yet to live, if I could be a human being only for one day, and to have the hope of seeing that marvelous country beyond the sky."

The mer way was simple. But her aunt had wanted more. She had wanted a soul like the humans to live forever, and she risked everything and everyone for it. After several heartbeats, Mairin said. "No. I'm not religious. Not in the sense that you mean."

"Oh. Well, if you have questions about the soul, there's going to be a service on Sunday. You could join me."

Mairin turned to Edwin. "Are you going?"

"I'll be attending the first-class service at the request of the captain."

"Then I will go with you, if you don't mind."

"Not at all."

One of the men on the other end of the table joined in. "And we'll be having a hymn sing here on Sunday night. The captain has given his approval."

Communal singing, just like at home. She could show these humans what a mermaid's voice sounded like.

After a pleasant dinner, Mairin's table companions began to divide up.

The men made plans to go to the smoking lounge and the women to the library.

"I'll go where Edwin goes," Mairin told Miss Foster. The plan wasn't to make friends, but to win freedom for her kingdom. She couldn't accomplish that if she spent all her time sequestered away with the women.

"The men go that way and we go this," said Miss Foster. "May I assist you?"

Mairin grappled for an excuse to change the regular order of things.

How was a woman to attract a man if they were constantly separated?

Miss Foster leaned down and whispered, “Absence makes the heart grow fonder.”

Now Mairin’s face burned. If her intentions were that obvious to Miss Foster, then why wasn’t Edwin responding? She really didn’t want to resort to using the siren voice, but she might have to. If she couldn’t make

headway, she’d test it out and see if she could control it. Her mother, Nahla, and Aunt Sapphire would be livid if they knew how far she had strayed from her assignment since surfacing for the first time.

“Yes, you may assist me. Thank you.” Mairin smiled at Miss Foster and then allowed herself to be separated from her mission. The lack of control she had above-sea grated. Perhaps this was how Neme felt whenever Mairin made the decisions for them. Neme always seemed content to go along, but what if she was merely deferring because Mairin was the princess?

The other women and the child returned to their cabins, so that left Mairin and Miss Foster for after-dinner tea.

The second-class library was up one deck and down the corridor from Cecily’s room. A cozy space, it too was covered in wood paneling, with a white plaster ceiling and white columns. Clustered groupings of chairs and tables provided gathering places, and a row of bookshelves beckoned along the wall. Several people sat off by themselves at writing desks.

“Tell me about yourself, Mairin.” Miss Foster sat back in a mahogany chair with her tea.

“This is my first time on a ship.” Mairin hoped to steer conversation away from anything personal, but Miss Foster seemed the personal type.

“Do you have family in America?”

“No, but I have a brother, mother, and father back home.” Mairin needed to regain control of the conversation and get Miss Foster talking about herself.

Edwin could talk for hours about his work. Perhaps all humans could.

“As a missionary, your job is to teach children about their souls?”

“Among other things, but yes, that is the most important lesson I teach.

I can feed their minds, but if I’m not feeding their souls, I’m doing them a disservice. They’ll miss the most important lesson of all. One that affects their eternity.”

Mairin was once again struck by Miss Foster’s confidence. “How do you know what to teach? My grandmother taught my aunt something about her soul, and it turned out to be not only wrong, but destructive to the whole… family.” Mairin almost said *kingdom,* but caught herself.

Miss Foster looked thoughtful, as if measuring her words before she said them. “I keep it simple, teaching them from the Bible. I have no special knowledge myself, only what has been written there. My girls look at the natural world and already sense that there is something outside themselves that they are accountable to. That’s where we start. With creation. Because once you understand God created you, the next question to ask is why?”

“*Why,* indeed?” Miss Foster asked hard questions. As a mermaid princess, Mairin was expected to lead her people one day. She was trying to learn all that entailed, but she and the queen didn’t always agree.

The finman, now dressed in a second-class steward’s uniform, stood before them, interrupting her thoughts. “Can I help you ladies find anything on the ship?” he asked. “Your rooms or another passenger?” He looked at Mairin expectantly.

“We’re fine, thank you,” Mairin said in a clear diction. “I’ll let you know if I need your assistance.”

He gave an exaggerated bow before stalking off, ignoring a woman holding up an empty coffee cup, trying to get his attention.

CHAPTER 21

Saturday morning, there was a clatter at the door as the stewardess turned the handle. “Excuse me, sir,” Miss Higgins said. “You can’t come in here.”

“I’m not leaving,” said a male voice. “I’ve been here since dawn, and I won’t be put off.”

“Suit yourself, Mr. Charles, but you must remain in the hall when I open the door. I’ll not be having any impropriety on my watch.”

Mairin smiled at Miss Higgins’s boldness. She knew how to take control of the situation.

“Oh, Miss Mairin. That singing manager will not be put off, I’m afraid.”

She set the breakfast tray on the table.

“Tell him to come in, then.” It was time to let the man loose. She hadn’t the time to juggle him and Edwin. Hopefully, his anger would be directed at Cecily and not her.

“First, let’s get you presentable. Where is that tailor-made I had in mind for you today?” She rifled through the wardrobe and came out with a blue serge dress. “I’ll replenish the water in your flowers while you put this on.”

Mairin was doing up her boots when Charles pounded on the door again.

Miss Higgins opened the door like it was the first time she’d heard a knock. “Won’t you come in?” she said.

The man barreled through as if worried she’d change her mind and shut the door on him. “Cecily has sent a Marconigram confessing that she abandoned ship and has gotten married.” He waved the typed note in her face. “Is this true?” He shook his head. “Why am I even asking? Of course, it is. I’ve not seen her since Queenstown and here you are in her room.”

Miss Higgins’s eyes opened wide, and she began to tidy the room.

Mairin was glad the stewardess stayed.

Charles clenched the note in his fist. “She tells me not to take it out on you, and I won’t. I’ve worked with Cecily long enough to know this was all her idea. But keep in mind that I will not sign another singer like her again.

If you can’t be honest with me, don’t ask for a contract.”

“I don’t want a contract.”

Charles inclined his head like he hadn’t understood.

“The life of a professional singer is not what I want. And I’ve nothing to do with Cecily, other than she asked me to complete the crossing for her and send her things back to her. She was most concerned with her confessions book.”

“Her confessions book? Great. It’s nice to know where I stand. Where her contracts stand. Thank you for being honest. You probably can’t sing at all, can you?” His shoulders slumped. “I’ll go cancel her shows.

Unbelievable.”

Zale arrived just as Charles stepped back out into the hall.

“Dorothy Gibson’s on board, isn’t she?” Charles said to no one in particular. “She’s only twenty-three, so there’s lots of years left for her.

Maybe she’s looking for a new manager.”

He spun around and was off.

Mairin exchanged a look with Zale. “That was easier than I thought it would be.”

“He knows where his bread is buttered. You like that expression? Heard it from one of the stewards.”

“Did you now? Was that when you were playing shuffleboard? Or maybe when you were eating lunch without me? How about when you were supposed to make sure I got around the ship safely?” She was so glad to see Zale again, but she couldn’t stop herself from lashing out.

Miss Higgins gave a brief wave and backed out of the room.

Zale’s expression turned unreadable, and he said, “Actually, it was when they were teaching me to play cricket.” He held a finger to his lips. “Or was it when we were playing deck tennis? I can’t remember. There are so many distractions on this ship I didn’t think about you until it was too late.”

Mairin set her lips. Too late. Yes, it was too late. Too late for her pride to suggest they spend the day together until it was time for her to see Edwin.

Edwin had invited her to meet for dinner again. It seemed the only shipboard experiences the human wanted to share with her were eating and playing cards.

“Mairs, don’t be angry. I’m giving you what you wanted. You can pretend I’m not even here as you go about your business.” He walked over to the open porthole. “When you’re ready to return home, I’ll escort you and keep you safe until you’re back in the kingdom.”

Watching Zale look out over the water gave her a twinge of homesickness. Something she’d never experienced before, never having left home. It felt a little like mal de mer, but in her heart. She couldn’t give in to sentimentality, not when there was still so much to do.

“I used to think the Little Mermaid was weak, but she was tough. She walked in their shoes.” Mairin looked at her dainty button-up boots. Her aunt must have been in agony the entire time. “She committed to her cause, and so have I. We’re going to surface again, Zale. I won’t stop until we do.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“You don’t understand. What we have right now…what we are experiencing? This should be for all of us.”

Zale pointed to his legs as he marched toward her. “No, this is not the mermaid way either. We’re meant to be in the sea, Mairin. This is the sea witch’s way. Moab tricked us into doing what she wants, and we went along with it, justifying our motives along the way. I wish I’d never…” His voice trailed off.

Mairin stiffened. He was sorry he ever came after her. “You’ll see,” she said, “and you’ll thank me.” She wheeled her chair away from him and didn’t turn around when she heard the soft click of the door as it shut between them.

A

, where she’d tried curried chicken and gelatin

dessert, Mairin set out to find Edwin. He turned up in the reception room and looked happy to see her.

“Miss Mairin, I hope you’ve been enjoying your day.” He had a notepad out, but closed it and slid it into his jacket pocket.

“I am, thank you, but I find myself in need of companionship.” Mairin copied an exchange she’d learned from observing the passengers. She was glad that she’d been able to sense the siren voice and squeeze it out before it tainted her words. She wasn’t willing to admit failure yet.

“Well, I’m spending the rest of the day in the darkroom developing my photos. Good news, though. I’ve accepted an invitation for the two of us to dine with the captain.”

Mairin hesitated. Another day alone when she should be with Edwin.

She bit her lip. It was only Saturday, and they wouldn’t be in New York until Wednesday. At the rate of speed their relationship was moving, they would end up parting ways and Sapphire would resume her watch over him.

That, or the finman might try to intervene. Mairin shuddered to think what he’d have planned if she failed.

“Don’t worry, the captain’s quite friendly, and we’ll do just fine at his table. We’ve come a long way since our first day on board, don’t you think?”

Oh, polite Edwin, you misunderstand me. Couldn’t you quit working long enough to fall in love? “We have made some strides. You especially when it comes to food.”

He laughed. “I can almost convince myself I’m on land, were it not for the ocean view everywhere I look. So, you’ll join us?”

“Yes, I look forward to it.”

“Before you go, let me take a picture of you. It’ll be a souvenir of your first crossing.”

He pulled out a small black box from his waistcoat pocket. After he opened a lid, he extended out an accordion lens. “Where would you like me to snap it?”

“In front of the ocean,” she said. Photographs didn’t last long in the water, but she would take it back with her and show everyone what the waves looked like above-sea.

While they made their way to the promenade deck, Edwin talked of his job, his opinions of the ship, and what he might write about. Mairin wanted to talk about her observations of humans and what life would be like for the

merpeople once they were set free. She couldn't mention any those things in front of Edwin. But talking about his work didn't seem like a good way to make him fall in love, either. She needed to be someone she wasn't to win him over. If she couldn't figure this out, she would fail Edwin by not keeping him alive. Her fake smile was getting harder and harder to keep affixed to her face. Edwin needed someone else to save him.

When they reached the edge of the enclosed area of the promenade, she lifted her hand. "I'd like to stand at the rail, if you don't mind," she said.

"Whatever you would like, Miss Mairin." He wheeled her into a corner of the enclosure where the chair would be secure from rolling. "What do you need me to do?"

"Let me lean on you." She reached for his outstretched arms as she pulled herself off the chair. Pain in her feet and legs gripped her, but she pressed on, determined to work through the sharp sensation of knives.

"Are you sure?" Edwin said.

Mairin nodded. She needed to feel the full weight of her choices, cuttingly painful feet and all.

"Let's go." Slowly, they made their way across the promenade deck.

Past the glass enclosure amidships to where the wind sliced through the thin areas of Mairin's clothing. It was a curious sensation. Shocking at first. It also brought with it a fresh blast of the briny ocean smell Mairin loved so much.

The finman leaned against the wall, watching. He saw her in Edwin's arms and his mouth widened in a greedy grin.

Mairin turned away from him. Let him think what he liked. There were no romantic notions in Edwin's mind. She could tell. Just like the Little Mermaid could feel her prince slipping away from her, Mairin knew Edwin was not developing feelings for her. He treated her more like a kid sister than a romantic interest.

Farther ahead, a man and woman stood as one against the cold. He'd opened his wool coat for her, and she'd nestled herself tight to his side.

Mairin recognized them as one of the many honeymooning couples on board.

Where had her grandmother gotten the idea that if a man married a mermaid, he could give her a soul and retain his own? Edwin didn't look at her with intensity in his eyes, the way that honeymooning groom looked at his bride.

"I appreciate you helping me adjust to life on board," she said.

"If I must confess, you've taken the edge off my own nerves. You've made me less wary of the ocean."

Mairin tried to ignore the prick to her conscience. In reality, she was supposed to be keeping Edwin safe, but her deal with the finman had made her actions less virtuous. She was Edwin's last hope if the finman truly meant to kill him, but she couldn't in good conscience use the siren voice, could she?

"How about here?" he asked. He'd brought her to the corner of the ship where you could see both ocean and the stern.

She leaned against the rail before taking a deep breath and standing up straight. *How does Zale stand without grimacing?*

"All right. Give me a minute to frame you. He put the camera up to his eye. Okay. Now smile."

A gust of wind blew and Mairin smiled.

"That's it. Stay here. I'll get your chair." Edwin dashed to the enclosed area.

Mairin turned and leaned against the rail, taking her weight off her feet.

She peered down into the sea, the wide wake created by the *Titanic* creating foam and bubbles that floated on the surface. She breathed in the cold,

moist air while fighting against the pull the water had on her. *Jump in!* The waters called to her, shooting a hurtful, burning sensation down her legs.

A barely perceptible movement under the surface caught her attention, and her stomach churned with instant worry. There were five finmen following the ship.

Edwin returned with the chair and helped her get settled. “Can I take you anywhere before I go?”

She shook her head. “No, thank you. I’ll stay out here a little longer.”

He smoothed down his hair that had blown awry in the wind. “I’ll see you tonight.”

As soon as Edwin left, the finman, dressed in a crisp white steward’s uniform, stood at her elbow. “See my friends down there? Just a little insurance the sea witch sent along in case you get scared and back out, princess.”

Angrily, she looked up into the empty eyes of the finman. “You are a deceiver in every way. You set an impossible task before me. You give me legs, but they’re too painful to use. And you keep pressuring me to hurry.

I’m doing my best.”

“I’m continually disappointed in you mermaids. You have the tools to get the job done. What more do you want? Use that pretty voice of yours.

The sea witch can only hold off the rest of the finfolk for so long. They’re eager to take your kingdom. If you don’t come through for us, there will be consequences.”

“I don’t have my own voice anymore, do I? You made sure of that. And you don’t need to threaten me since we’re after the same thing.”

He laughed, a hollow sound. “The way you stare at that water like you’ve been flopped up on land for too long makes me think you’re having second

thoughts. I was under the impression that you hated the humans for what they've done to the merpeople."

She narrowed her eyes. "If I've fooled you into thinking I care for them, then I'm succeeding, and it shouldn't be long now." She spoke with more confidence than she felt. Scared of going forward with the plan? No, she wasn't scared. She was confused. Mairin had always assumed that the Little Mermaid's love interest had been one who strung young girls along, promising them a future together, when he was saying the same thing to five other girls. But traits like loyalty and faithfulness? Those were among the best qualities in a companion. Unfortunately, she suspected Edwin had those qualities in abundance.

"You!" Zale had come out on deck and saw who Mairin was talking to.

He bounded to the rail and then grabbed hold of the finman by his steward's

coat.

"Brave merman," the finman mocked. "Best you not cause a scene." He easily jerked out of Zale's grasp, surprising even Zale, who stared at his empty hands.

Mairin's eyes widened. She ought not let her guard down around Moab.

He was crafty and knew more than she did about her own kingdom. There was too much that she didn't know. Zale's presence had bolstered her confidence, but even he was no match for the finman.

"Is there a problem here?" A man in an officer's cap came forward, a stern look on his face. The officer must have seen the scuffle and was staring at the steward, whose job it was to cater to his passengers, not pick fights with them.

Zale shook his head. "A misunderstanding. I think it's all cleared up now." His eyes continued to focus on the finman, who met his gaze with thinly veiled contempt.

The officer jerked his head, and the finman immediately left. Mairin watched him go, but she shouldn't have. He turned around and blew her a kiss.

She glared back. The arrogance. If they were in her kingdom, why, she would…

The officer stepped into her line of sight, interrupting her thoughts.

"My apologies. If that steward gives you any more trouble, be sure to let me know." He clasped his hands behind his back. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"No, thank you," Mairin said, focusing on the human officer. There was nothing he could do about the finman.

"Enjoy your trip." He nodded curtly and then left.

Zale wheeled Mairin away from the rail. "We ought do as he says."

Mairin's blood boiled. "I'm not doing the finman's bidding on every little thing. I'm here for our kingdom." She wondered what had gotten into

Zale. Normally, he wouldn't have backed down so easily.

He stopped walking and came around so she could see him. "I don't mean the finman." He pointed in the opposite direction. "The officer. He told us to enjoy our trip. I don't know about you, but so far, I haven't been having much fun trying to talk you into diving back into the ocean with me, so maybe it's time for me to talk you into trying to be human and get it over with. Maybe then you'll see how ridiculous you're being and that your home is with me." He cleared his throat. "*Uh.*.. with us…back in our kingdom." He went around her and started pushing her chair again.

Mairin was glad he couldn't see her face. She didn't want to hurt him, but he simply didn't understand and didn't seem willing to try. "You know I'm trying to save the human. I just need a few more days."

"Fine," he said.

But the way he said it sounded anything but fine.

CHAPTER 22

A shout rose from below, and Zale leaned over the rail. “They’ve got some kind of game going on down there.” He watched closely while Mairin observed him.

Zale was an active triton guard. Being cooped up on a ship must be hard for him.

“Go do something,” Mairin said. “Go to the gymnasium, or play squash.

Get some of your energy out.” *And we’ll both be happier.*

“No, I can walk around with you.”

She watched as he clenched and unclenched his hands. He was tense, and it put her on edge. “You don’t need to walk with me. Besides, there are some human girl things I need to take care of today.”

“Oh. Okay then.” He looked quizzically at her, but needed no more convincing. He bounded off.

After several encounters with the people on board, Mairin had much to think about. These humans weren’t turning out how she expected at all.

Especially sweet Edwin. Even though he came from the family Mairin had grown up blaming for her lack of freedom…well, things were confusing.

She needed to sort through her emotions and her future. The future of her people.

When she thought she heard Zale’s voice below, she gritted her teeth and pulled herself up to lean on the rail.

A ring of young men had gathered to play some kind of deck game and Zale, having removed his jacket and rolled up his sleeves, got right in the

middle of them. She much preferred him to play with this group of men than play shuffleboard with those flirty girls.

She watched as he joked with them and genuinely got along. He connected with the humans in a way that she was having a hard time doing.

She felt false, but he looked natural. Why was he complaining that merpeople didn't belong in the human world when he so clearly fit in and seemed to enjoy himself?

She listened in on human conversations as people meandered by, bundled up against the chill and with faces tilted to the warming sun.

"I thought there would be more people to talk to on this crossing. The ship isn't even full," said a woman in a velvet suit. She and her companion, a woman wearing a brocade dress, stopped and looked down at the deck below.

"Did you see the passenger list?" the other said.

"Who are some of these people? Not our usual crowd. Oh, some are here, all right. Under assumed names. I saw Lady Duff Gordon in the Ritz restaurant when I had a look last night."

"Hiding out, is she? It's not like we'd cause a fuss over her." The woman looked thoughtful. "I wonder if she'll be in the lounge later? I hear she enjoys a good game of progressive bridge."

The two continued on.

A young couple arm in arm followed them.

"I should get back to my mother," the man said. "She'll wonder where I am."

The young woman lifted her dainty chin. "Or you could just introduce us, so I don't have to hide anymore."

"Not yet, darling. She—"

The couple left and Mairin couldn’t hear the reason why the young man wasn’t introducing his sweetheart to his mother.

Down below, Mairin picked up on several more conversations. The group Zale played deck games with were primarily speaking Swedish. A cluster of women nearby spoke Finnish, and beyond them, several Syrian men stood at the rail pontificating in Arabic. So many of the passengers were talking about the new lives they were headed to in America and Canada. They were filled with hope of what their lives could be like, just as she had started this journey filled with hope of how her life could change if she broke the barrier for the merpeople.

In most ways, the humans were unique from mermaids. But in some ways, they were similar. They had families and dreams. Zale had found a way to relate to them, but she still struggled with reaching Edwin.

She absentmindedly sang Cecily’s song.

Let me call you “Sweetheart,” I’m in love with you Let me hear you whisper that you love me too Keep the love-light glowing in your eyes so true Let me call you “Sweetheart,” I’m in love with you The wind carried the song down to Zale and he glanced up. Startled that he might have heard the words, she backed away from the railing, her heart racing.

A woman wrapped in a travel rug and sitting in a nearby deck chair clapped her hands. “That was lovely, dear. You sing like an angel. Perhaps a shipboard romance is in your future.”

Mairin didn’t know how to respond and was grateful when the bugle sounded. The woman pointed inside before picking up her book and leaving.

Mairin chanced a look over the edge. Zale had retrieved his jacket and was waving goodbye to the gentlemen below. She eased back into her chair and

then wheeled to the entrance. By the time Zale returned, she should be in the elevator. She hoped Miss Higgins would be available to help with her hair. She didn't think she'd be able to get away with wearing a hat at the captain's table.

"T

, miss. Are you sure I can't talk you into wearing one of Cecily's diamond necklaces? They're not genuine diamonds, or she wouldn't have left them behind, I can assure you."

Mairin fingered her aunt's pearls. "No, I'm sentimental about these."

She was unclear about how the pearls worked. They allowed her to break through the barrier, but if she took them off, would that mean she would remain above-sea for the rest of her life? Mairin let go in case she accidentally broke the string. Faced with forever being on one side of the barrier or the other, she'd choose undersea, despite what Zale might assume.

In her rush to get back to the kingdom, Aunt Sapphire had probably never considered the idea of Mairin remaining above-sea. There hadn't been time to talk about consequences for getting completely out of the water. Not that Aunt Sapphire would have approved or even fathomed it was a possibility.

It had been four days since Miss Pearl had been attacked. If the attacks had ended, surely Aunt Sapphire would return soon to take back her position. She'd find five finmen following the *Titanic* and Mairin nowhere in sight. And then what would she do?

"Miss Mairin?"

"Sorry, I was thinking about something back home. What did you want?"

"I just asked you if that was all."

“I’ll be at the captain’s table tonight. Is there anything I should know?”

“*La-di-da!* Dining with the captain.” Miss Higgins’s smile faded as she must have seen Mairin’s apprehension. “Will your gentleman be there? The one with the camera, not the one who…the other one.”

“Yes.”

“Easy, just sit by him and smile and nod at everything he says. You’ll make it through. Watch the other women at the table and copy what they eat and how they eat it. Think of two stories you can tell about your journey so far on the ship. That’s what most of them talk about with the captain. He wants to know if your journey is pleasant. Do you know who else is going to be there?”

“A man who was one of the ship’s designers and several other couples.”

“You’re going to eat with Mr. Andrews? We all adore him. Violet asked him to give us more privacy in our quarters, and he designed *Titanic* so that we do. We even have our own cupboards, so we don’t have to share. Now, if our roommate is a smoker, our clothes don’t have to stink. He’s done a marvelous job with this ship, but I still see him wandering around taking notes on how to make things better. He’ll make you feel welcome. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

Mairin took one last look in the mirror. They’d settled on Cecily’s mulberry velvet dress. Mairin loved the feel of the fabric, and it was warmer than the lighter fabrics she’d worn yesterday.

As for the hairstyle, Miss Higgins had done a wonderful job wrangling Mairin’s hair into order and decorating it with pretty pearl combs. If nothing else, Mairin looked the part of a young, sophisticated human.

She took a deep breath. “Thank you. I’m as ready as I’m going to be.”

W

the first-class dining reception room, Moab was waiting for her.

“You look dressed to succeed,” he said. “Good.”

Mairin suppressed her revulsion. She didn’t know how much more she could take of the finman. “Any news from my kingdom?” she asked. “Has the sea witch left them alone?”

He sneered. “Don’t worry. The sea witch hasn’t hurt your precious kingdom.”

“My aunt Sapphire will return soon and come looking for me. Promise me you’ll leave her alone as well.”

“Don’t worry about anyone from your kingdom. No one is going to come looking for you until you’ve completed your task.”

“You said you’d not attack them if I helped.”

The finman looked irritated. “We’re not hurting anyone, just keeping them busy so they leave you alone.”

“But you hurt Miss Pearl.”

“We could have killed her, but we didn’t, princess. Now, is there anything else you need to argue about, or can we just get on with it? The longer you take, the longer my boys have to keep your kingdom occupied.”

At her silence, he stalked off into the first-class dining room.

Mairin continued into the reception room, hoping to see Zale before she went in. He was off keeping busy, which is what she asked him to do, but it was unsettling knowing he was on board, but not with her. No, that wasn’t it exactly. She was unsettled because there was a rift between them. The

longer they remained at odds, the harder it was going to be to fix their friendship when all this was over.

Edwin arrived with Mr. Andrews, a surprisingly young man for someone who had designed such a palace of a ship. He smiled warmly and shook Mairin's hand. "I'm pleased to meet you," he said with an Irish accent.

"My stewardess tells me how happy she is with the design of her quarters."

"It's kind of her to say so. I took over the designs from Mr. Carlisle when working on *Titanic*'s sister ship, the *Olympic*. We like to make improvements with each ship, and the shipbuilders at Harland and Wolff have done excellent work. I'm already making notes for the next build." He clapped his hands. "Shall we go in?"

The captain's table was already full, save their seats. Altogether, they were eight at the table. The introductions went by so fast, Mairin forgot the names as soon as they were said. She'd met so many people already, but only cared about the one sitting across from her.

"Captain Smith has a reputation for matchmaking," said the woman beside her as she looked between Mairin and Edwin.

Captain Smith shook his head and held up his hand. "Now, now. I don't put people on the spot."

"Do you deny any marriages have come from sitting at table with you? I distinctly remember Kate Douglas Wiggin saying she met her second husband on the *Britannic* at your introduction."

The captain smiled. "I cannot boast of matchmaking, or I'll have every unattached lad and lassie requesting an invitation."

The woman leaned toward Mairin and her perfume overwhelmed. "I speak of the author of *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, you know. Lovely girl.

She was only looking for a quiet trip across the Atlantic but ended up with a husband."

Mairin tried not to squirm as she felt all attention directed her way.

Edwin just smiled, and Mairin wondered if he even realized everyone was

inferring that the two of them should be a couple. Nothing seemed to sway him away from his good-natured attention and toward a more romantic endeavor.

Fortunately, the first course arrived, and everyone's attention diverted to the caviar placed before them. Mairin knew by now not to eat too much with each course. According to the menu, they'd be served multiple courses, and if she was to make it to the last fruit and cheese plate, she needed to take only a few bites of whatever they placed before her.

Mairin appreciated the food from the ocean most of all. Land food was interesting and all the sauces the chef added were tasty. But nothing was as good as food from home, even if it was prepared differently.

When the waiters brought in lamb with mint sauce, talk turned to the building of the ship and its innovative use of watertight compartments. If even four compartments flooded, the ship would remain afloat. The ship was practically unsinkable.

But the woman beside Mairin would have none of it. She turned to Mairin and said, "Have you met the Ryersons?" Indicating with a polite jut of the chin, the family eating at the table just beyond theirs. "It's the saddest thing. Their eldest son died Easter weekend in a car accident. You can see there they have three of their other children with them. They all have such long faces on them. The girls look to be your age. Maybe you could brighten them up. Keep their mind off their tragedy."

Indeed, they had a sad look about them, dressed in dark clothing, Mr.

Ryerson with a black armband, but Mairin wasn't out to meet girls her age.

She nodded politely at the woman's attempts to make connections and turned back to the captain's discussion.

“Was the darkroom sufficient?” the captain asked Edwin.

“I almost forgot.” Edwin patted around his jacket pockets until he pulled out a stack of photographs. He removed the top one and handed the pile to the captain. The other he gave to Mairin. “It had everything I needed.”

Mairin fingered the black-and-white image of a human girl standing at the rail, wisps of her hair lifted in the wind. She wore Cecily’s tailor-made dress as she hadn’t bothered to change into a tea gown for the afternoon.

Her wide eyes looked haunted, as if she shouldn’t be there. She was smiling because Edwin had told her to do so for the picture. Would she have smiled if he hadn’t?

Seeing herself this way scared her a little. She looked human. But she knew that she was a mermaid and she would never belong in this world.

Not like this.

“What do you think?” Edwin asked her.

“It’s wonderful, thank you.” As she spoke, a light, musical undertone attached itself to her own voice. She hadn’t made a conscious decision to try the siren voice, nor could she stop it. The entire table turned her way as if waiting for instruction. Every word that followed was laced with the sound of another’s voice, and she tested its potency.

“Edwin, perhaps you can cut this woman’s meat for her?”

“I’d be delighted.” He reached over the table and, much to the woman’s surprise, took a knife and fork to her roasted lamb.

The men looked at Mairin entranced, and the women, annoyed. She couldn’t help herself. The finman, as their waiter, behaved himself, smiling and serving the humans as if he liked them.

The table was enraptured by her, and she knew she could do with them what she wanted. It was a powerful and scary feeling.

“And Captain, would you taste Mr. Andrew’s wine to see if it is good to drink?”

Without thought, the captain took Mr. Andrew’s wineglass out of his hand and took a sip. Mr. Andrews smiled and acted like this was a perfectly normal thing to do.

Amazed, Mairin glanced around the dining room to see if anyone had noticed and spotted Zale. He watched the table with a curious expression.

The finman followed Mairin’s gaze and clucked his tongue.

But Mairin kept talking. She couldn’t help herself. She made another gentleman stand up, walk all the way around the table and sit down.

Zale’s eyes widened.

He knows. Of all people to catch her using a siren’s voice. He knows.

Mairin stared back, more directions to Edwin falling from her lips.

The finman then stood between her and Zale, blocking Zale’s view. But Zale would not be put off, and he marched toward her. The finman dropped his tray on an empty table and met Zale halfway. There was a minor dustup before the finman quietly muscled Zale outside into the reception room.

When Mairin stopped talking, it was as if the spell was broken and the table continued on without her. The captain took control of the conversation, and she was largely forgotten again.

For the rest of the meal, Mairin didn’t speak. Based on Edwin’s reaction to her voice, she knew she could coerce him to do what she wanted. It made her queasy. But by taking a bite whenever someone asked her a question, she was able to avoid talking. They might think her rude or hungry, but it didn’t matter. She had to learn to control this voice or it would control her.

It was too tempting to force others to do what she wanted them to do.

CHAPTER 23

“O h, Miss Mairin, you’ve got one of your men out there hot under the collar.” Miss Higgins kicked the door shut with her foot as she brought in a breakfast tray. “I don’t know what you’re doing to them.”

Mairin turned from the open porthole where she’d been watching the ocean. “Which one is it now?” Mairin suspected it was Zale, but didn’t know if she should be glad that he was still talking to her or frightened about what a triton guard might do.

“The one I prefer for you. You don’t take offense that I say that?”

“Can you hold him off while I change?”

“Certainly. Are you going to the Sunday service? I’ll pick out an appropriate dress for you.” Miss Higgins opened the wardrobe and rifled through the clothing. “We’re nearing the most dangerous part of the crossing. Everything gets colder for a while. The air, the water. We might even see some icebergs float by.” She carried on her chatter while Mairin stewed over what Zale might say to her. None of it would be good. He’d probably insist she give up the quest to free their kingdom. He’d tell her it wasn’t worth using a siren’s voice. That they would protect Edwin if the finman tried to hurt him. Zale would be right, of course. But that also meant she’d have to give up her dream of leading her people to the surface.

Miss Higgins put her hands on her hips. “Want me to do your hair before I go?”

“Do you have time?”

“Not really, but I’ll make time. It might give the man outside the door a chance to weigh his words before he says something he’ll regret.”

Mairin frowned. “Or me.”

“That’s true. We woman can be quick with the tongue, can’t we?” She finished brushing Mairin’s hair and pinned it up. She used Cecily’s hair rats with great skill and soon had Mairin’s hair poofed in all the right places.

“You’ll want to wear gloves to service and even a hat if you’d like. Most ladies leave them in their rooms while they’re at breakfast and come back for them before service.”

“Thank you, Miss Higgins.” Mairin caught the woman’s hand and held it. “For everything.”

“You’re most welcome.” She smiled. “Another courtesy you might not be aware of is the gratuity. If you see Mr. Charles, let him know who has given you good service, and he should take care of tipping for Cecily.”

Mairin nodded. She didn’t plan on seeing Charles again, but if she did, she would ask him to be generous toward Miss Higgins.

“I’ll be back in later to change your linens and lay out a tea dress for the afternoon.” As the door shut behind Miss Higgins, Mairin heard her say,

“She’ll be ready in a few minutes.”

I can’t hide in here forever. Mairin slipped into the warm wool outfit.

Wanting to show her strength, she stood on her painful feet and walked forward on cutting glass. She took a deep breath and opened the door, fully expecting Zale to storm in. But he didn’t. He stood in the hallway like a triton guard in the palace hall. He didn’t make eye contact, but looked over her head. Mairin had prepared herself for an outburst, not silence.

“Won’t you come in? I saved you the strawberries as a peace offering.”

Zale’s gaze flickered down to her eyes and then back over her head.

“Why do you think we need a peace offering?”

“Because you won’t even look at me.”

He lowered his gaze, and it bored into her. She backed out of the doorway. “That’s better.” But it wasn’t. She preferred when he wasn’t glaring at her.

He stood at the threshold. “Are you going to use the siren voice on me?”

“No! I won’t make you do anything you don’t want to do.”

“You’re reserving that privilege for the humans, then.”

She grabbed his arm and pulled him in. “I can’t talk to you in the hallway, someone might come by.”

“You could command them to leave,” he retorted, before moving to allow her to shut the door.

“That’s not fair. You haven’t let me explain myself yet.”

“Explain away.” He sat at the table and popped a strawberry into his mouth.

Mairin wrung her hands. “Well, you see, Moab tricked me into eating a piece of chocolate the sea witch had imbued with a siren voice. I didn’t ask for the voice, and I didn’t plan on using it. When you saw me at dinner, the siren voice had just come out. A surprise to me, and I couldn’t control it once I started.” *Partial truth.*

Zale made no comment but plowed through the fruit until it was all gone.

“Fine. I may have played with the voice a little, just to learn what would happen. Then I kept quiet for the rest of the meal. You didn’t see that part.”

Drained, Mairin returned to her wheelchair. She’d had enough of the pain.

After a long, uncomfortable silence, Zale poured two cups of tea and brought one to her. “I told you I would stay with you, but you’re making it harder and harder to do so.”

“I know.” Somehow this calm, cool Zale was more effective than a blustering, angry Zale would have been. If he had yelled at her, she could

have yelled back and they both would have felt better…in the moment. But now, he was forcing her to consider her own actions, and it wasn't pretty.

Mairin put on her borrowed long white gloves. She might want to pause time to evaluate her life, but that was impossible. The ship and the clock kept on moving.

"I don't think we should go," Zale said. "A church service seems too human a thing for us."

"We've gotten this involved with them, we may as well learn all we can.

We'll be able to update the elders on what we observed. Miss Pearl will be thrilled when she awakens." Mairin sounded too chipper even for her own ears, but she was trying to improve relations with Zale. "Come on. It's almost ten thirty. I don't want to be late."

Zale wheeled her toward the elevator. "I suppose Edwin will be there."

"Yes. You can leave me with him, if you prefer."

He grunted his disapproval as he wheeled her to the first-class dining hall. "I'll stand in the back."

"You can sit, Zale. We're not in the palace."

He grunted again.

The dining room tables had been pushed back to allow for rows of chairs in front of the elaborately carved sideboard where there was a built-in piano. Captain Smith stood nearby talking with an officer while waiting for the service to start.

Edwin was keeping an eye out for her, and when he saw her, he came and claimed her from Zale.

Mairin couldn't be sure, but she seemed to detect a hint of sympathy in Zale's expression when he nodded in greeting. Then he left to resume his watch at the back of the room like a triton on duty.

“Where is everyone?” Mairin whispered, slightly anxious about the siren voice making an appearance. “I thought the entire first class would be

here. Don’t they care about their own souls?” There were three hundred twenty-four people in first class. The numbers here were maybe half that.

“It’s complicated for some folks.” Edwin handed her a new hymnal.

Before Mairin could ask any more questions, Captain Smith led them in a song from the hymnal. Mairin wanted to sing, ached to sing, but she didn’t trust her voice. Not now. Not when she couldn’t control the siren voice. What would happen if she started singing and attracted the attention of all the human males in the room? What then? She fumed at Moab. He should have asked her if she wanted the siren voice before forcing it on her.

Singing was the one thing that brought her people together at the end of every day and brought her joy. Now she couldn’t use her voice because it was tainted.

Once the singing ended, the captain opened a little black book.

“Reading from the Book of Common Prayer on this first Sunday after Easter:

‘Almighty Father, who hast given thine only Son to die for our sins, and to rise again for our justification: Grant us so to put away the leaven of malice and wickedness, that we may always serve thee in pureness of living and truth; through the merits of the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.’

“We move on to the epistle 1 St. John 5:4–12…”

While the captain spoke, Mairin tried to make sense of it all. The whole question of humans and their souls was still a mystery to her. Zale would tell her to leave the humans to their world and put all her thoughts back to their kingdom where they belonged. She would. Soon.

With the service ending, the captain had them turn to page 418 of the hymnal. Again, Mairin listened as the others sang:

O God, our help in ages past, Our hope for years to come,

Our shelter from the stormy blast,

And our eternal home…

After the service, she and Edwin followed many of the others out for a walk. It was frustrating to not be able to see and read Edwin's facial expressions. She could tell so much about what he was thinking by the angle of his eyebrows or the curve of his lips. There was no pretense there.

He wasn't trying to hide anything. Which meant he wasn't trying to trick her. If the Little Mermaid's prince was like him, Mairin understood why her aunt fell in love and held nothing against the prince.

Zale was never so open. He masked his emotions well, as a triton should. Good for maintaining order, but bad for a mermaid trying to decipher what a merman was thinking. Except when he saw Mairin using the siren's voice. The look of betrayal on his face cut deep.

Edwin's conversation wasn't turning romantic in the least, and she hated to admit it, but she did not have what it took to make Edwin fall in love with her. Not without using the siren's voice. He was nothing but a courteous gentleman, making sure that she had a pleasant trip across the ocean at Cecily's request.

But if she couldn't convince Edwin to fall in love, she'd have to protect him from Moab. And what would that mean for her kingdom?

Edwin stopped near a young sailor who had lowered something into the water.

"What are you doing?" asked an older woman bundled in a fur coat.

She'd stopped at the rail and shivered. The slight breeze ruffled her white hair, most of which was tucked under a headscarf.

The sailor pulled up the object he had tossed over. "I'm checking the water temperature." He looked at the device.

“And?” the woman prompted.

He showed her the reading. “Lower than usual. Means we’re near the ice fields. Keep your eyes peeled for icebergs.”

“I’d like to see an iceberg,” Mairin said as they continued past.

“Only from far away, please.” Edwin pointed to the horizon. “This ship might be unsinkable, but a berg could do some damage. It’s deceptive how they’re so much larger under the surface than what we can see.”

Mairin nodded. “You’d be surprised about all that’s under the water.”

“I’d like to see the ocean the way you do.” Edwin began pushing her along the rail, as close to the water as they could get. “The water used to scare me, but not anymore. Being on this ship and talking with you, I think I’ve gotten over a lot of my phobias.” He’d stopped pushing her and was now leaning over the rails, arms outstretched to catch the spray which was too far down. “Let’s go to a lower deck. The water is hard to reach from here. Or, we could jump in right now. Go down deep where you can show me what’s under there.” Edwin took off his jacket and dropped it onto the wood decking.

Mairin’s heart raced, blood rushing to her face. What was happening to Edwin? He wasn’t talking like himself, or like he was falling in love. He was falling under a spell. Not true love. She didn’t think she wasn’t using the siren voice, but maybe she was. Did that mean the siren voice was taking over?

“We don’t want to go into the water.” Her voice sounded off. As if the words she was saying didn’t match the sing-song voice underneath. *What is happening?*

“Doesn’t it call to you? We must go to it.” He rolled up one shirt sleeve and started on the other.

Mairin loved the water, but bringing Edwin down with her was not the plan, not even in her wildest thoughts. Where was he getting these ideas?

He would die. At that moment, the finman walked by and nodded encouragingly at her.

The nod brought clarity to Mairin's mind. Moab was going to use Mairin to break the barrier one way or another. If she couldn't complete the circle of unrequited love, then he'd use her to send Edwin to his death and break open the sea barrier.

Edwin was a nice man. He thought she was a nice young woman. She couldn't do it. She couldn't hurt him, even it meant freeing her kingdom.

She wasn't at war with these people. It was the finfolk who were invading their kingdom. It was the sea witch she was at war with.

Everything she had seen on board the *Titanic* had shown her that these humans were not at all what she'd expected. Even Cecily, who was somewhat foolish and selfish, had been kind and generous as well. All her life, Mairin had secretly hated the humans for what they had done to her.

But now she realized these humans hadn't done anything to her. And for what it was worth, Edwin's great-grandfather hadn't done anything to the mermaids either. His only crime was to not fall in love with the Little Mermaid. A mermaid who could never have been human anyway.

"Leave me here and go inside to the smoking room," she said, focusing on bringing the siren voice into her control and forcing it to overpower him.

Edwin stepped away from the rail, a confused look on his face. Slowly, as if in turmoil, he turned away from the water and walked into the nearest entrance.

Once he was gone, away from her, Mairin pressed her hand to her chest, trying to still her pounding heart. It had taken all her will to send Edwin away. The siren voice was not meant to protect, and she had to fight it to keep it from sending Edwin to a watery grave.

Mairin felt someone staring at her, and she turned to see Moab standing near an empty deck chair. His dark gaze fell on her, sending a chill up her

spine.

“You shouldn’t have done that, princess.” He turned and walked away.

CHAPTER 24

Dinner came and went and Mairin searched for both Moab and Zale but found neither. Zale needed to know something had changed, and she feared for Edwin.

Edwin was going to the hymn sing tonight, but she didn't trust herself to be near him. When she thought about joining her voice with the others, her heart sank. She couldn't sing. Not when the siren voice was so strong. Not when she was a threat.

She could go look, but not go inside the room. Make sure that Moab was leaving Edwin alone. She could also return to the water and watch for Edwin to fall overboard. But there were those finmen waiting for her below-sea. Nahla said she was faster than they were, but five of them? And if Moab went after her, too…something was unusual about him. Even Zale backed down from him, and he was not the type to back down.

She entered the elevator and the young operator said, "Mr. Jespersen has gone down to the hymn sing. Is that where you're going?" The operator had an expectant look on his face.

"Yes, how did you know?"

He grinned. "I'm here to serve, miss." When they arrived at D-deck, he opened the gate and said, "Enjoy your evening."

Mairin wheeled herself into the reception room, ready to listen for Edwin's voice to make sure he was there, but when a steward opened the door, Miss Foster, who was standing just inside the room, saw her. She waved and invited her in. "Come sit with me, we're about to get started."

She held the door open.

"My voice is off tonight," Mairin said, her hand at her throat. "I'll just sit out here and listen."

“Nonsense. You can hear better inside. No one will make you sing.”

The second-class dining room had been cleared of dinner dishes and reset for breakfast, and the passengers had gathered at the tables near the piano in the sideboard. Everyone had dressed warmly, as there was a lingering chill in the air. Edwin had taken a seat in the middle, for which Mairin was grateful. She could keep an eye on him from a distance without risk of talking to him and having him want to throw himself into the sea.

Mairin finally felt like she was part of the secret sisterhood that started with the request of the Little Mermaid to show love to a family that was kind to her. When Mairin looked at Edwin under those circumstances, the knot in her gut loosened.

“Thank you for coming tonight,” Reverend Carter began.

Mairin recognized him from the dinner where she met Miss Foster.

He introduced himself as the vicar of St. Jude’s Church, East London.

He was a serious-looking man, with a square jaw and tall forehead. His wife, Lillian, was younger than he. And with no children of her own, took it upon herself to make sure everyone had a hymnal.

“Joining me on the piano is Mr. Robert Norman from Scotland, on his way to see his brother in Vancouver, Canada.” The young Mr. Norman smiled and waved from the upright piano. He was fair and thin with a smart look about him.

“Let’s pray,” Reverend Carter said.

While everyone else bowed their heads, Mairin took the time to look around. About a hundred second-class passengers had gathered. And to her surprise, there was Zale. He sat behind a column, trying to blend in. She’d caught him in an unguarded moment, and he looked worried. He met her gaze and quickly masked his feelings. Had he overheard her and the finman and was now helping her guard Edwin? She felt better already.

They would be in New York in a few days. Once she had Edwin safely back on land, she and Zale would have time for an in-depth talk. Maybe they could even explore the city before returning to the ocean. Technically, neither of them had gone on land yet, so they should try it before Sapphire caught them. Then, Mairin would watch over Edwin from the water like the sisterhood had been doing for decades. Zale could return to their kingdom to see if it was safe for Sapphire to return and take up the watch again. No one back home would be any the wiser that they'd gone so far over the line that the queen would be sorely tempted to banish them if she found out.

"Amen," Reverend Carter said, and Zale broke away from Mairin's gaze.

She tried not to think about what it meant that Zale didn't return the smile she'd given him. He might not have seen it before looking away.

"Let's start with 'It is Well with My Soul' and then I'll open it up for requests. This song is a favorite of my wife's. It was born out of tragedy but has gone on to comfort and inspire countless people. Horatio Spafford planned a vacation to England. He sent his wife and daughters on ahead while he was delayed on business. They were traveling across the Atlantic, going in the opposite direction as we are right now, when there was an accident. Their steamer was hit by another ship and sank in twelve minutes.

His wife, Anna, was rescued unconscious from the water, but their four daughters were killed. Later, when Mr. Spafford took the same journey to join his wife, the captain showed him where the ship went down. Mr.

Spafford, in his grief and hope, penned this hymn. Let's sing it together."

He glanced at Mr. Norman, who nodded, having found the page.

Reverend Carter lifted his hand and with the downbeat, people began to sing:

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,

When sorrows like sea billows roll;

Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say,

It is well, it is well, with my soul.

It is well, with my soul,

It is well, with my soul,

It is well, it is well, with my soul.

As the music and the voices swelled together, Mairin's heart uplifted as well. She'd missed the nightly singing in the kingdom. Missed the power of voices joined together. She closed her eyes and let the music wash over her.

The story and the words of the gentle song touched her heart. She was well acquainted with shipwrecks, but she'd never dwelt on the human cost before. Had never known the names of the humans before.

Moab was right about one thing. She'd developed feelings for the humans. A concern for them and their well-being, and she'd do all she could to protect them from him.

Someone from the back called out a request for "For Those in Peril on the Sea."

"Ah, yes," Reverend Carter said as Mr. Norman flipped through the pages in his hymnal. "A traditional British song for ocean crossings,

'Eternal Father, Strong to Save.' Written by a man named Whiting for a student of his who was nervous about crossing the Atlantic. Whiting himself had survived a terrible storm at sea and believed that God had spared his life. The words are based on Psalm 107." Reverend Carter nodded to the

pianist, who began the introduction. Reverend Carter kept time with his hand and then led the first note, strong and clear: *Eternal Father, strong to save,*

Whose arm hath bound the restless wave,

Who bidd'st the mighty ocean deep

Its own appointed limits keep;

Oh, hear us when we cry to Thee,

For those in peril on the sea!

Mairin related to the words she heard, for she felt like she was in peril on the sea. What was the finman going to do next? Would he force her to use the siren voice? Would she be able to stop herself? She would have loved to join in harmony the way she would back home, but she kept her lips tightly sealed.

It was close to ten o'clock when a steward brought in a tray of biscuits and set up for coffee. The clink of cups on saucers sounded in the pause between breaths. Reverend Carter took note.

"As we come to a close, I'd like to thank the purser for allowing us the use of the dining saloon." He nodded in the man's direction, and the passengers clapped their appreciation.

"The ship has been unusually steady, and it's made for a pleasant trip.

Still, I think I speak for us all that we are looking forward to our arrival in New York where we can give a good report on *Titanic*'s maiden voyage. It's been a privilege to lead you in singing to our Lord. Just think, this has been the first time there have been hymns sung on this boat on a Sunday evening, but we trust and pray it won't be the last. Let's close with 'Now the Day is Over.' "

Later, while everyone gathered around the food, Mairin made her way to Zale. "Moab's not waiting for me to…try to free our people." She was

too embarrassed to tell Zale the entire truth. "He's going to hurt Edwin, instead."

"I wondered if something had happened. Then, we'll both protect the human." Alert, Zale scanned the room.

“Thank you,” Mairin said. “For not asking too many questions.”

“Maybe one day you’ll trust me enough to tell me without my asking.”

Mairin looked at her hands. So human with no scales. So plain. She missed her pretty royal scales. They made her feel strong, like she swam with her own armor. Human skin was thin and vulnerable.

“It’s hard to be the princess that no one trusts. How can I prove to everyone that I’m not going to ruin their lives? How am I going to measure up to the queen? My mother?”

“You’ve always been enough for me.” Zale said the words so softly that Mairin could pretend she didn’t hear them. And then Miss Foster waved goodbye, giving Mairin an excuse not to comment.

“See you tomorrow,” Miss Foster said. She left with a group that included Miss Wright, the young woman with an oval face and pretty, mournful eyes who had sung two solos that night.

Eventually, Edwin left with a group of men to go to the smoking room, the only place still open for a little longer. She couldn’t follow him there.

“Do you want me to go with him?” Zale asked.

“Yes, that would be wise.”

“Let me bring you to your room first. He should be safe in the middle of the ship while you get settled. I’ll take night watch, and you can stick by him during the day.”

“If Moab was going to hurt Edwin on board, he would have already, don’t you think? He must have something else planned.”

“Your job isn’t to keep him alive, but to protect him in the sea, isn’t it?”

She nodded.

“Then we watch the water.”

CHAPTER 25

T he air was frosty that night, so they went to Cecily's room to see if she had left a warm coat behind. Miss Higgins, anticipating her needs, had already laid out a soft fur coat on the bed.

"I'll go get my own," Zale said. He jogged down the hall and returned wearing a long wool coat. Mairin had long since stopped asking him where he was *borrowing* things from.

"What did you trade for your legs?" he asked while they were still in the privacy of the stateroom.

"I was in the bargaining position. Moab wanted something from me, so I extracted a promise that he would prevent the sea witch from attacking our kingdom." She buttoned her ankle-length coat. "I don't know what that promise means now."

Hopefully, the triton guard and the sisterhood were prepared. There would be no reason for the sea witch to hold back. Mairin's biggest concern right now was Edwin. As long as Edwin was alive, Moab's focus would be on *Titanic,* not her kingdom.

It felt good to be honest with Zale, without pretense or trying to turn the situation to better her position.

"What does Moab have of yours?" she asked him. "And under what conditions do you get it back?"

"Never mind. It's not important. I can live without it. As long as I have you."

She raised her eyebrows accusingly at him. She wasn’t the only one not telling the whole truth.

W

, the stars shone ever more brightly. Even the humans were captivated by how many points of light were scattered across the night sky.

Many passengers were coming out on deck just to see them.

“There are so many stars tonight,” Mairin said. “It’s the most beautiful sight I’ve seen yet. And to think, we might not have ever seen it, trapped undersea like we have been.”

“We have beauty undersea, too,” Zale said. “At no risk to ourselves or our kingdom.”

“The finfolk were already attacking us. I had to act.” It was automatic for her to justify herself. She dropped her defenses. “And yes, we have beauty undersea. Oh Zale, I did something dangerous, and I’m worried about what might happen next. I don’t trust Moab.”

She couldn’t help but compare her bargain to that other fateful one. Her aunt, the Little Mermaid, had made life difficult on herself. Because maybe she hadn’t asked the right questions. Or she settled too quickly on the answers. Her grandmother had given her terrible advice that sent the Little Mermaid on a quest to be something she wasn’t.

“I’ve always wanted to restore honor to my aunt’s memory. Redeem her mistake. And here I go, making a bigger one. What’s going to happen, Zale?”

“I don’t know, but we’ll face it together.”

Mairin considered the passengers. There were things going on around them that the people knew nothing about. She had to protect them. “No

matter what you think of me, you will stay with me until it's over?" She asked him again. She still wasn't assured of him. He'd been so angry when he saw her using a siren's voice, and even now, she wasn't confident that she had it under control.

Zale's jaw clenched. He was a triton preparing for battle. It was second nature to him, which was why her father let him join the guard at such a young age.

Zale nodded, and Mairin pressed him on it. "Are we finally agreeing?"

He glanced at her before maintaining his vigilance over the water. "We agree on most things. I just don't like it when you keep secrets from me."

"I'm the future queen. I have to keep secrets from…" She didn't finish the sentence because she was thinking two thoughts at the same time and didn't want to voice either.

One, she had to keep secrets the way her mother had been keeping secrets from her. And two, she would always have secrets to keep except with her future king. A subject which she had spent little time thinking about before now, because a king implied a husband which implied someone she loved. And if she'd figured anything out on her journey above-sea, it was that she loved Zale. Stubborn, proud, protective, caring Zale.

He turned and looked at her. "I'll go keep watch on the other side. Call me if you see trouble."

Mairin took a breath and eased herself out of her wheelchair. She'd have to stand at the rail to best watch the water.

As soon as Zale disappeared around the bow, the finman returned, as if he'd been waiting for the opportunity.

"I thought you'd gone to report to the sea witch," Mairin said.

The cunning finman grinned. "Locked away, what help could she be to me? A weak ruler, she's the reason the finfolk are shut up in the ocean like you

merpeople.”

Mairin couldn’t quite understand what he was saying.

He sighed. “Ah, princess. You should have joined me. Together, we could have led our people to freedom and then,” he swept his arm toward the door leading to the grand staircase, “we could have taken over the land.

I’ll just have to do it on my own now.”

“You mean, the sea witch didn’t send you?”

He laughed. “You’re young. Naïve. Perhaps one day I’ll give you another chance. Maybe I’ll let you rule your kingdom from the abyss where I’ll send all you nasty mermaids.”

Mairin refused to let him bait her while she gathered her thoughts. The finman scared her more than anything else in the ocean. He was smooth and polished, but he was more powerful than she was, and he was hiding information. All this time he’d been luring her into his trap, pretending they were after the same thing. But they weren’t. She wanted freedom for her people. He wanted to rule them. She had to find a way out.

A young couple burst out the door, laughing. Mairin recognized the actress Charles had been interested in. “I’ll put on something warmer and meet you back here,” she said to a tall young man. He continued on his own, presumably to do the same. Neither were dressed to be out on deck. It was so cold, ice crystals floated in the air. The phenomenon would normally capture Mairin’s attention, but she had to stay focused on Moab.

“Always in a rush, aren’t they?” The finman said. “These humans get sloppy, especially in their haste to set records and prove their worth. Notice how the other ships have stopped moving for the night, afraid of the ice, yet *Titanic* steams onward?”

Mairin listened for the engines of other ships beyond their own. The distant rumble of engines had been replaced by high-pitched squeaks and groans of

ice shifting. She shivered. Her area in the ocean rarely saw ice, and nothing as big as what she sensed was out there.

A satisfied smirk slowly spread over the finman's face that froze Mairin's blood.

"What?" she asked with more bravado than she was feeling. "Are you planning something?"

"Oh, no, princess. You had your chance to be part of my plans, but you got cold feet, as they say. And, also as they say, the show must go on. *Gah!*

I love their little expressions, don't you?" He laughed. "Showtime!"

Suddenly, Mairin heard the man in the crow's nest ring a bell three times. Several heartbeats later, the ship inched to the left at the same time there was a faint grind of engines reversing course.

The finman put both hands on the rail as if bracing himself. Mairin did the same and held her breath.

A slight bump. A scraping.

Mairin breathed out in relief. Whatever the finman tried to do had failed. He'd underestimated the people, just as she had. The ship sailed on.

Now all she needed to do was convince him to leave her alone. She'd continue to New York, and by then, her aunt Sapphire might return to relieve her of her duty.

The finman, tilting his head and raising his eyebrows, held up a finger.

The engines stopped, and the silence was deafening.

"Can you hear it, little mermaid?"

Mairin's keen ears, attuned to the many sounds of water, heard it. She shook her head in disbelief. The finman wasn't referring to the doors opening or the confused voices of the passengers as they poured out onto the deck,

wondering aloud why the ship had stopped. What she heard was the sound of the sea rushing in to claim this ship.

The sound made her sick to her stomach. She'd seen plenty of ships on the bottom of the ocean, but until recently had never given much thought of what happened to the people on those ships. The triton guard always cleared the sunken ships before the rest of the merpeople were allowed to explore.

The reason why struck Mairin like a blow.

"What happened?" asked a man with a glass of brown liquid in one hand, a cigar in the other.

A passing steward said, "We've struck a berg. Nothing to worry about.

We'll probably be up and running again in an hour or two."

The man and several others went back inside while several more people made their way to the rail to look out at the sea.

Meanwhile, the finman continued to smirk at Mairin.

"We need to help them," she said.

"No. We don't." Moab smiled as he watched the confusion around him.

A woman in a fur coat thrown over her night clothes approached the finman. "What's going on?" she asked, thinking she was talking to a crew member.

"We nicked an iceberg. Nothing to worry about. You can go back to bed."

"Get your life belt," Mairin said. "Hurry."

She ran to find Zale, the pain in her legs secondary to the urgent need.

Behind her, the finman laughed.

She met Zale at the front of the ship. He held a chunk of ice in his hand.

“It’s bad, Mairs. The ship is going down.”

Mairin looked into the third class well deck. A group of young people had already come up to see what had happened, and they were playfully tossing chunks of ice at one another that they had picked up from the deck.

More people continued to wander outside to find out what was going on. Some hadn’t gone to bed yet and remained in their finest clothes from Sunday night dining. Others had already changed into their night clothes and came out with fur coats slung over thin silk or cotton.

“What about the people?” she asked Zale, already knowing the answer, but needing to hear comforting words.

“They’ll board the lifeboats and then wait for another ship to rescue them.” Zale looked calm, as did most of those around her. Calm and

confused, really. Some looked irritated to be awake and out in the cold at this time of night.

“What is going on?” a woman in slippers and a wool coat asked a steward who was trying to get inside the doorway.

“We scraped by an iceberg, ma’am,” he said as he disappeared into the ship.

“An iceberg. Oh, I’d like to see it. John? Come with me.” She tugged on a gentleman’s arm. He, at least, was still in his dinner jacket and shoes, although he had undone his tie.

“What time is it?” the man answered, clearly not wanting to go see an iceberg.

“It’s not even midnight,” the woman said. “We’ll look and then go to bed.” The couple continued their squabble around the ship.

Zale raised his eyebrows. “It’s been over twenty minutes since we passed by the iceberg. They won’t be able to see it in the dark. That was the problem to begin with. It came into view so suddenly.”

Edwin approached them. “Miss Mairin, I’m glad I found you. You need to go up to the boat deck and get ready to get on a lifeboat. Here, take my life belt. I’ll get another from my room.” He looked at Zale. “The life belts are above the cabinets or under the bed.”

Mairin didn’t take it. “I can get my own. You should put yours on.”

Although, she noticed that few had donned any life belts yet.

Edwin leaned in to whisper. “I don’t want to cause a panic, but I saw a chap coming up with wet bags from the mail room. They’re flooded down there. I bet the squash court is under as well.” He shoved the belt at Mairin.

“Please, put it on and go up to the boat deck. The captain will likely make the call soon.”

Mairin needed Edwin to put on the life belt. If anyone needed saving from a shipwreck, it was he.

“Fine, but only if you come with me.”

Edwin was about to argue, but acquiesced. “I can see you off,” he said, his breath coming out in puffs of air.

“What an odd thing to say. You’ll get into the very same lifeboat with me.” They’d board the first lifeboat and be on their way. She wasn’t about to let this man get even a foot wet. No matter what she’d tried to accomplish, her remaining task was keeping Edwin safe.

She let him help her into the awkward life belt. It was sewn in white canvas and covered her upper body. It tied at the sides. She felt ridiculous wearing it when she was the last one who needed it, but if that’s what it took to get Edwin moving, she would wear it.

“The elevators might not be running,” Edwin said, looking for her wheelchair.

“That’s fine. I’m feeling strong tonight.” That wasn’t exactly true.

Physically, she was the same as she’d been since first surfacing days before.

“You sure?”

She nodded, trying to keep her mind on the devastating sound of water surging into the hull. “Besides, I can’t take the chair on a lifeboat.”

Zale reached to help her, but she leaned onto Edwin. It was her excuse to keep him by her side. Mairin didn’t know how the people were going to react when they realized what was happening, and she didn’t want to lose him.

As they started to go up to the boat deck, there was a terrible noise from the tall funnels and people covered their ears.

“They’re releasing steam,” yelled a gentleman who was following them.

“Nothing to be alarmed at. It’s so the boilers don’t explode while we’ve stopped.”

Not quite reassuring, but good to know nothing unusual was happening.

She thought back to the songs they sang earlier that night. How the ship the Spafford family was on had sunk in twelve minutes. It had been longer than

that since the engines stopped. Just how long would it take for this ship to sink?

CHAPTER 26

By the time they'd climbed up to the boat deck, more curious people had gathered. Passengers continued to arrive, forming an odd congregation of the well-dressed and the half asleep. It would have been quite comical if Mairin didn't know how serious the situation was.

No official word had gone out regarding any danger, but with the engines stopped, people sensed something was going on. The lifeboats remained covered and no one on the boat deck could give them any more information other than what they already knew.

Captain Smith and Mr. Andrews, the ship's designer, strode past, not making eye contact.

"While they work it out, why don't we go inside where it's warm?"

suggested Edwin.

They followed the others to wait in the first-class lounge where the band was playing. Mairin didn't know what the protocol was for abandoning a ship, but this didn't feel right. All the musicians were together now, playing what Edwin called *ragtime*. Seemed too jolly given that down below, the sea was working hard to take down the ship.

"Ah, here comes Murdoch." Edwin said, jutting his chin as several stewards met the first officer at the door.

Mr. Murdoch spoke quietly and briefly to the crew, and then the stewards dashed outside.

"And there they go. Likely off to their emergency stations." Edwin cleared his throat. "I quizzed the captain thoroughly on standard safety protocols,

right down to the new SOS code they plan to use. Stands for *save our souls.* Appropriate, don't you think? *Titanic* will be the first to use it."

He ran his fingers nervously across the edge of the table.

Mr. Murdoch faced the room and, as he already had everyone's attention, simply said, "We'll be lowering the lifeboats shortly. The women and children should go to their assigned lifeboat now."

"You, see? We should have never gotten on. I told you I had a feeling."

Mrs. Emma Bucknell continued to talk in this vein to Margaret Brown as they moved toward the door. Mairin recognized them from the tender in Cherbourg where Mrs. Bucknell had been uneasy about boarding the *Titanic*.

"I'll go help wake people up," Zale said. "You two go get on a lifeboat."

T

in groups of four, and the seamen worked quickly to take off the canvases and get the boats ready to lower into the water.

"It's simply a precaution," said a man to his wife. They stood close together at the rail near Lifeboat 7, looking down into the black water far, far below. "It'll give them time to work on the ship without worrying about us passengers."

"What if the lifeboat tips, and we all end up falling to our deaths?"

"These seamen do this all the time. They know how to lower a boat. See here? The davits there are built specifically to allow for a safe and smooth descent."

The woman stepped back, shaking her head. "Let me watch a few others go down first. The situation may change, and they might decide we don't need

to get off the ship after all. I'd much rather stay inside where it is warm."

To Mairin, the sea was a welcome friend, but to these humans, it was potential death. When faced with getting off the luxury liner and into a wobbly boat on an icy ocean, they were scared. If they realized they'd all soon be in the ocean, whether they liked it or not, they would get in the lifeboat now.

"We'll go," Mairin said. She could lead the way and save Edwin at the same time. "Aren't you coming?" Mairin said. She'd noticed he'd taken a step back. "Nothing to be scared of. We've made it this far together, haven't we?" She appealed to their shared experience, hoping to spur him into action.

Edwin shook his head. "I'm of the opinion of waiting a bit myself," he said. "The captain's called for other ships in the area to come assist. But you should get in, just in case."

Mairin refused. "I'm not going if you're not."

"The brave thing right now is to get in a boat," he said. "The water is calm, so there is little chance of tipping."

"I'll go." Miss Gibson, the actress, came up from behind and got in with her mother. "Or I fear I'll never get to drive my little gray car again."

Another woman holding a Pomeranian dog wrapped in a blanket found a seat.

"Are there any other ladies here?" Mr. Murdoch asked. One of the seamen tried to talk more women to get on, but most held back. "Anyone else?" Mr. Murdoch asked. "It's only half filled but we can't wait."

"See the lights?" A man in a bowler hat, overcoat, and slippers pointed out to sea. "Our rescue ship is already on the way. We may as well stay until the ship is closer."

Mairin strained her ears, listening for the sound of ships in the water.

She shook her head. Whatever was out there wasn't coming in their direction. For all she knew, the finmen were out there trying to keep other ships away.

"Come on, William. Fred, you too." Miss Gibson called to two young men standing near the lifeboat. They looked to First Officer Murdoch for guidance, and he motioned for them to get on.

Mr. Murdoch told one young seamen to check that the plugs were in.

The young man hopped in and confirmed the boat was ready to go.

"Thanks, George. You go with this one." Mr. Murdoch turned to the passengers watching. "Anyone else?" When no one came forward to join the thirty or so who were seated, he looked disappointed, but said to the crew on the lifeboat, "Let it down. And then stick close to the gangway.

You've got lots of room left." The boat began a steady descent and disappeared from view.

Suddenly, a whistling noise shot up into the air and a bright light illuminated the night sky.

"It must be serious if they're sending up flares," said a man calmly smoking a cigar.

"Maybe that will catch everyone's attention," said a steward trying to coax passengers to step into another boat.

The next boat filled more quickly as several couples boarded together.

"Miss, there's a spot for you," said a tall man dressed in a fine suit. He was talking to a young woman huddled near the wall.

"I'm only a stewardess, Mr. Ismay, sir."

"Makes no difference. You're a woman. Take your place."

The woman got in, and so did the steward assigned to the boat.

“Is there a sailor in the boat?” an officer asked.

While they scrambled to find a sailor to help navigate the water, Mairin noticed the band had moved out of the lounge and onto the boat deck,

perhaps to encourage the passengers to leave the false warmth and safety of the ship.

The second boat was declared ready, and this Mr. Ismay called, “Lower away! Lower away!” as if he could make the crew move faster. He seemed to irritate them more than help.

“Who is that man?” Mairin asked Edwin. “He’s intent on speeding things along, even if he’s getting in their way.”

“No doubt. He’s the chairman of the White Star Line. Apart from the captain and Mr. Andrews, he’s the most in a panic about what’s happening now.”

The lifeboat had begun its descent down the side of the ship when two men made a hasty decision to jump on board. There was a cry as they landed on the women seated there.

“Never thought I’d see a distress rocket in action,” Edwin said. “Did I tell you about my great-grandfather’s cousin who invented one? There were so many ships that went down in the area where he lived that he wanted to help. He and my grandfather worked together.”

Mairin nodded politely and subtly tried to pull Edwin toward the next boat being loaded. He’d have plenty of time to teach her about rockets once they were in a lifeboat.

“Where is everyone?” he asked. “Two lifeboats have already gone down on this side. They should be lining up by now.”

Mairin hadn’t been paying particular attention, but now that Edwin had said something, she looked around at the shapes moving in the darkness.

There were very few passengers nearby to get into the boats.

Mrs. Duff Gordon and her husband, along with Miss Francatelli, waited patiently in their lifeboat near the bow as it hovered over the edge of *Titanic*.

“You, there, Miss Mairin. We’ve got a seat here for you.” Mrs. Duff Gordon called out to Mairin. She was bundled in a fur coat and had tied a

turquoise crepe scarf on her head to keep warm. “Talking about your new gown would keep my mind off this tiny boat.” There were only twelve people in the boat and the seamen were getting it ready to launch.

Mairin looked pleadingly at Edwin, the glow the mermaids had given him shone in the darkness. “Please?” she asked, tempted to use the siren’s voice. But if she did, she was afraid that instead of ordering everyone onto lifeboats, the siren voice would send them all into the water. When he didn’t respond, she said, “Thank you, Mrs. Duff Gordon. Edwin prefers to wait longer.”

“No, I don’t,” he argued. “You go ahead with Mrs. Duff Gordon. She’ll take care of you.”

He turned and walked away, but Mairin followed him. She didn’t know what else to do.

“Bridget, where are you going?” shouted a voice with an Irish accent as a third-class passenger, a young woman in a plain coat, clambered out of a lifeboat and back onto the deck of *Titanic*.

“I left my new hat in the cabin,” she said. “I’ll catch another one.”

“And I’ve left Jack’s picture,” said another as she, too, climbed out.

They rushed toward the nearest entrance into *Titanic*.

An officer put his hand to his head. “Where are they going?”

Edwin turned to Mairin, “I’ll help knock on doors and get the women and children up here.” He was yelling above the noise of the steam that was still being released from the funnels, which made him sound angry.

Mairin tried to follow him, but Edwin stopped her. “I’ll need to move quickly. You’d best get on a boat, and I’ll see you after we’re rescued.”

“I’m not getting on a boat until you come back up here.”

Edwin looked like he was going to argue again, but then changed his mind. “I wish you wouldn’t wait.” He sounded exasperated. “Pay attention to the boats. Don’t wait until the last one.” He turned away and headed for the stairs just as the ship’s funnels quieted.

Once the glow surrounding Edwin faded away, Mairin’s eyes adjusted to the dim light and she saw how empty the boat deck still was.

“Some protector I am,” Mairin said.

Zale returned carrying a young boy, whom he handed to a steward. The boy’s mother, holding a baby, prepared to board a lifeboat. “We’re taking a trip to see the stars,” the mother said to her child. “Won’t that be fun?”

Seeing they were settled, Zale joined Mairin. He shook his head. “I heard what you said. It’s not over. He’ll be back. They’ll all be up on top soon. Once their rooms flood with ice water, there’ll be no denying what’s happening.”

Mairin couldn’t believe what she was seeing. Her mother sent her to watch over Edwin, but now she needed to watch over hundreds of people.

That was a lot of people to move. At this rate, they wouldn’t all make it off.

The ship was already listing at an unsettling angle.

“Shouldn’t you wait for the lifeboats to fill up before launching them?”

she asked the closest steward.

“Are you getting in?” he said.

She shook her head.

“That’s why. We save who will be saved.” The call came to let the boat go down, and the seaman began lowering the rope.

Mairin turned to Zale in frustration. “I’ll see what I can do with the women. The men will not move until they do.”

“Get in, miss,” said one of the men to a woman staring at the lifeboat.

“There are enough boats for everyone. Your husband will get on the next one.”

“Hurry, May. You’re keeping the others waiting.” The husband lifted his wife into the lifeboat and kissed her before stepping back and blending in with the crowd.

A new group of families arrived on deck with worried faces. Mairin noticed wet hems on several of the women’s skirts. These were the families

in third class. With cabins in the lower decks, they knew the urgency of the situation.

Mairin nodded to them and moved on. She needed to coax those waiting inside the public rooms to come out before it was too late. She gritted her teeth against the pain of walking as she passed the gymnasium. Inside, she saw the woman whose hat the finman had taken. She sat with her husband on the mechanical horses. He’d cut open one of the life belts and was showing her the cork inside.

Mairin entered the room and skirted around the men who had gathered.

“It’s time,” Mairin said to her. “You must go.”

“We were on the tender together,” Mrs. Astor said.

“She’s right, it is time,” her husband said as he stood. “Let’s get things settled.”

“I’m not ready.” Mrs. Astor placed her hand protectively around her midsection.

Mairin moved on. This was going to be harder than she thought. No one quite understood the seriousness of the damage or how quickly a ship could go down. The tilt should be obvious to all now. She felt it, and she'd only been above-sea for a few days.

As she worked her way around the ship, Mairin spoke with as many women as would listen. Those with children were easier to persuade, but even some of them refused to leave their husbands or older boys behind.

Even more didn't believe that the ship was going to sink. They thought she might limp into port or be towed there.

The officer on the port side wasn't allowing any men on board unless he was a seaman and could help row. The starboard side was allowing a few men on, based on what reasoning, Mairin couldn't guess. None of the lifeboats had been full before they were lowered.

She met up with Zale on the port side where they watched an elderly woman in a long fur coat start to get on a lifeboat, only to turn around and

go back to her husband.

"Mrs. Straus!" the maid in the lifeboat called in vain. "Please, don't go."

The couple on deck embraced, and Mairin thought she heard the wife say, "I will not be separated from my husband. As we have lived, so we will die. Together."

Several people tried to talk them both into getting on the boat, but Mr.

Straus said, "I will not go before the other men."

Hand in hand, the elderly couple walked back inside the ship to wait.

"Any more ladies?" This time it was Captain Smith making the call through his megaphone. Mairin could only imagine what was going through his mind as his ship began to falter. He'd been so proud at dinner, saying he'd never lost a ship in his long career, and this was supposed to be his last voyage before his retirement.

When no one came forward, he said to the crewmen, “Row toward the light and drop off your passengers. Then come back for more.” There were only thirty-five people on board, about half full.

“Why won’t they get into the lifeboats?” Mairin said to Zale.

“They’re afraid of the water, and they don’t think *Titanic* will actually sink.”

She didn’t understand it. “They needn’t be afraid, not as long as they’re in a boat. The water is calm.”

“It’s dark. It’s a long way down. It’s freezing cold. Until their fear of staying on the ship outweighs their fear of getting into the lifeboats, they’re not going to go.”

CHAPTER 27

A nother rocket went off, sounding a loud *bang* and bursting into bright white light.

In the glow, Mairin recognized Reverend Carter and his wife. An officer indicated they should get on a boat, but after a glance at the surge of people on deck, they both refused. Mairin continued her search for Edwin on the port side. Here, she spotted her stewardess and waved. “Miss Higgins!”

The stewardess wore a wool coat over her black-and-white uniform and left another stewardess to talk to Mairin. “Good, you’re up here. I went down to your room and saw you were gone. You’d best get on a lifeboat.”

“What about you?”

“I’m headed there now.”

“Thank you, Miss Higgins. For everything.” Mairin would never forget this human and her willingness to help her navigate life above-sea. Her kindness helped change Mairin’s mind about people.

“I suppose we don’t have to worry about sending Miss Cecily’s things back to her, do we?”

“No, we don’t.” They shared a smile.

Miss Higgins turned away and said to another stewardess, “Where’d you get that fur coat?”

“My miss won’t be needing it now, will she? And here am I in my nightgown. Come on, before they’re all away.” The stewardess bounced on her toes, trying to keep warm.

“Come with us,” Miss Higgins said to Mairin as a third stewardess joined them.

Mairin shook her head. “You go.”

“There’s nothing to be scared of. Get on a lifeboat and you’ll be saved.”

Her eyes flickered to something behind Mairin.

Edwin was on deck again, directing a mother and her children to a boat.

“Don’t wait for him. The sooner all the women get off, the sooner the men can take care of themselves.”

“Miss Jessop, Miss Higgins. You stewardesses there, hop in and show these women it’s safe.” A steward standing near Lifeboat 16 called the group of stewardesses forward. He showed them a rope ladder he wanted them to use. Other stewards had employed deck chairs to help bridge the distance from *Titanic* to the lifeboats as the gap widened.

“Best follow me, miss,” said Miss Higgins as she turned to get on the lifeboat.

It had been over two hours since the collision with the iceberg, and the drop to the water was not as far down as the first lifeboat that left an hour ago faced. The problem now was that the *Titanic* was tilting so much to port that there was a sizable gap between *Titanic* and the lifeboat as it swung out over the water. Mairin had noticed that previously, the ship had tilted to starboard.

The stewardesses clambered into the lifeboat, showing that it could be done and the hesitant women passengers followed.

Mairin joined Edwin. “You’re here. Let’s go back to the other side,” she said. “Mr. Murdoch is letting the men get on boats when there are no more women to get in. We can find some children who need help.”

Edwin looked grave. He turned aside from the boat, taking Mairin’s elbow. “Miss Mairin, I don’t want to frighten you unnecessarily, but I must tell you. The captain has told me there aren’t enough lifeboats for us all.

There are approximately twenty-two hundred souls on board, but only room for just over one thousand. They were hoping a rescue ship would arrive, and we could ferry people between them and us, but that will not be the case. When the people realize this, there is going to be a stampede for the remaining lifeboats. Do get in this one now, please."

More and more people congregated up on deck. Ship's officers continued to load some from the top boat deck, and others from the deck below where they had finally opened the windows around the promenade deck. Mairin had spotted the young Mrs. Astor getting into a lifeboat there, her husband being refused entrance even after he mentioned her being in the family way.

The baskets of warm bread that the night baker had sent up had all been distributed into each lifeboat. Another steward made sure each lifeboat had a lantern before it departed. While it had taken time to get organized, there was no excuse now for people to be standing around waiting.

"We didn't get life belts," a woman cried out.

The young piano player, Mr. Norman, stepped forward, took off his life belt and gave it to the mother with a child clinging to her. "I'm a strong swimmer," he said in that thick Scottish accent he had.

"There's not a moment to lose," the officers called out. "Please, get on the boats now." The calls sounded more urgent, and as the top decks sank closer and closer to the water level, people got serious about getting into the lifeboats. The last boats were being lowered with no extra room.

"Form a line to let the ladies through," said Mr. Ismay.

Edwin pleaded with Mairin. "It's the last one."

She pressed her lips together. "I'll be fine, no matter what happens."

Mairin observed all the heartbroken men who had just said goodbye to their wives and children. Some stood in the empty spaces where the lifeboats used to be, staring out at the points of light moving farther away.

Others carried deck chairs they planned to toss in the water to float on. A small group had gathered around the preacher who was traveling to the Moody Church, possibly giving his planned sermon right there on the boat deck to those that remained, determined to rescue souls for eternity.

“Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.” His words, spoken in his Scottish accent, rang out. His little girl had already been lowered on a lifeboat, and Mairin hoped she wouldn’t be afraid of the water.

“My child!” a woman cried, running from the other side of the ship.

“Please make room for us.”

There was movement on the full lifeboat, and Miss Foster climbed back onto the sinking ship.

“There’s room for you there.” Annie pointed to the seat she’d vacated.

The distraught mother said nothing but climbed into the boat. She’d barely sat down when the lifeboat jerked on the ropes as the sailors began lowering it.

“I’ll see you in New York!” a man yelled to his family as the boat inched downward.

Another called out, “Put your hands in your pockets. It’s going to be cold.”

Mairin joined Miss Foster. “You were safe. Why did you get off?” She was so frustrated with these people she’d come to know. Why couldn’t she convince any of them to leave the sinking ship?

“Our heavenly Father is as near to us on sea as on land. My trust is in Him. I have no fear.”

Mairin inclined her head. “You won’t survive the water.”

“I know.” Her words came out in puffs that solidified in the cold.

Mairin pressed her further. “But that woman could have handed the child to you like so many others have done.”

“Yes. But that’s not how she’s thinking right now. We don’t have time to weigh options. I won’t hold my choice against her. I thought I was crossing to New York, but I’m crossing to Heaven. It wasn’t what I planned, but I’m ready.”

Annie’s selfless act split wide open the crack that had already formed in Mairin’s thinking and her heart. Mairin thought she was being selfless by breaking the curse for her people, but what she was witnessing here was far more powerful. This sacrifice Annie and the others made was complete and utter selflessness in the face of a horrific death. They were choosing to walk into eternity in order that others might live. It was the most beautiful act she’d ever witnessed. She’d never expected to see it in humans. It was as beautiful as the Little Mermaid refusing to kill the prince when the sea witch gave her the chance. Choosing to die so that others could live.

Mairin’s eyes burned. She felt a tickle on her cheek and when she wiped her hand, realized her cheek was wet.

“It’s okay to cry,” Annie said.

“Mermaids can’t cry.” Mairin examined the tears on her fingers.

Annie looked at her funny. “Do you want to come with me?” she asked.

“I thought I’d go help with the children on the deck below. Many of the women refused to break their families apart, and now it’s too late. It’ll keep our minds off what’s about to happen. We can help them find something to float on until we can get them into a lifeboat.”

Mairin shook her head, her gaze fixed on Edwin and a crew member.

“I’ll stay with Edwin.” He had gone to an officer to ask what to do when they hit the water.

Annie nodded, reached out and hugged Mairin before leaving.

Meanwhile, Captain Smith walked along the deck dismissing his crew.

“Well done. It’s every man for himself.”

Zale returned from his check of the water level. He touched her elbow.

“We need to get off the ship, now,” he said. “We’re not immune to the violence that happens when a ship goes down.”

“But Edwin is still here. I have to make sure I’m near him when that happens.”

Zale marched over to Edwin. “It’s time to jump.”

With wild eyes, Edwin shook his head. “I’m with these chaps.” He pointed to some fellows who were moving to the uppermost part of the deck. “As long as she’s afloat, I want to be on her.” He looked over the edge into the dark water and visibly shuddered. “I’ll do my best to help you, Miss Mairin, but I wouldn’t count on me. Perhaps you ought to stay with your friend, here. You might be able to swim out to one of those lifeboats that left earlier. If everyone had known where we’d be now, there wouldn’t have been any empty seats.” He turned and clumsily made his way up the sloping deck.

Mairin made a move to follow him, but Zale held her fast. “No. Let him go.”

“I can’t let him die. I don’t know what else about our kingdom is tied to this agreement my grandfather made. Moab lied and my mother was keeping secrets. I can only backtrack to the last thing I was supposed to do.

Keep Edwin alive.”

“And you will. But first, we both need to get into the water.” Zale took off his jacket and unbuttoned his shirt. “If we get tangled in the ship when it goes down, we’ll be of no help to anyone. It’s going to be chaos.” He kicked off his shoes.

“There’s two more boats on the roof,” the cry went out and several men rushed forward to get on top of the crew’s quarters near the front of the boat deck.

“See?” Mairin looked up at the collapsibles. “He can survive in one of those.”

“There are hundreds of men who want to get on those two boats. Even if Edwin gets on, we need to be in the water. Now.”

Zale made a good point. She pulled the strings off her life belt. “All right, then. Let’s go.”

CHAPTER 28

T he icy seawater took Mairin’s breath away.

Her body was slow to become fully mermaid again, and for a moment she feared drowning herself. But once a mermaid, always a mermaid. Ever so slowly, her legs fused into a tail and brought great relief to the pain. Meanwhile, she struggled to draw in water to breathe as she wriggled out of her human clothing.

She pumped her tail and swam around the sinking ship, trying to get her mermaid lungs to respond. The pressure to surface was too great. She needed to breathe air above-sea. What had Moab done to her? She turned to go upward when Zale caught her by her waist and forced her to go deeper underwater.

“You need more water pressure. Trust me.”

At first, she tried to fight him off, but as they swam down, and she took great, gasping breaths, her lungs drank in the water. After several minutes, her eyes partially adjusted to the lack of light, and her lungs adjusted to breathing water again. She relaxed. “Thank you.”

Mairin felt at home in the water. On board, she was always a little uncomfortable, and her legs hurt. Now, all she felt was relief for herself, but also great anxiety for the humans above her.

“We have to go back,” she said, once her panic had subsided. She looked up and saw the ship nosed down into the water. The lights shone through the portholes, illuminating specks of plankton floating in the water.

“Yes, but first, get used to the water. Re-entry will be easier the next time.”

“Help me lift it until help arrives,” Mairin said, racing toward the hull.

Whatever light the passengers had thought they saw earlier, it wasn’t a ship coming to rescue them. Based on the rumblings Mairin felt through the

water, a steamship wouldn’t be arriving for another few hours.

She pushed her hands upward until she touched the metal and swam hard against it. When Zale caught up with her, he didn’t help, just floated beside her with a grim look on his face.

“Come on,” she said. “We can’t get the fracture above the waterline.

The damage sits too low, but we can help keep *Titanic* afloat a little longer until another ship gets here.”

“No, Mairin. I can’t.”

“But you’re a triton. I know your strength. Now is not the time for modesty.” She spoke to him like they were back in their kingdom, and he was being unreasonable.

Zale merely ran his hand along the side as if he was testing the worth for salvage use. She took his hand and pressed it against the hull. “They don’t have much time.”

When he still didn’t respond, Mairin dropped her hands. Her gut tensed, and she felt such strong remorse for Zale’s sacrifice. “I know what you traded.”

He wouldn’t meet her gaze.

“Zale! How could you?” She breathed out in exasperation. “Never mind. I’m sorry. I know why you did it. My fault again. Okay then, we have to think of something else.”

“Let’s go see what’s happening above-sea.” Zale swam up.

When Mairin surfaced, she quickly took her bearings. There was *Titanic*. Her heart lurched, seeing how badly the ship tilted forward. The water had overcome the entire bow, the giant propellers were sticking out of the water, and the people still on board could do nothing but hold on to the rails in hope of a gentle drop into the ocean.

Titanic formed a black outline where it blotted out the splash of stars in the night sky. Dots of lantern light marked the lifeboats as the people rowed away from the sinking ship. Several rowers seemed to struggle, but all boats pointed away from the disaster.

The sea remained still as glass and sound traveled far. Mairin heard crying, singing, praying, a music box playing, and several people arguing over going back to pick up more people, and whether there was a risk of suction pulling them in when the ship finally submerged.

When Zale didn't rise beside her, she swam down and found him with his hand against the barrier.

"I can't get through," he said. "I lost the pocket watch in all the confusion."

Mairin touched her pearl necklace. It was now their only way through the barrier. "It's probably in your jacket pocket. I can try to get it for you."

When all this was over, she wanted to spend time with Zale above-sea. He needed the watch. She could climb one of the rope ladders that had been flung over the sides.

He shook his head. "It's too dangerous. There's no time for you to get back on the ship. It won't be long now. Go see if you can find the human and take care of him."

"I'll still try." She shot up to the surface.

Mairin searched and found Edwin's glow amid the unfortunate souls who remained on *Titanic*. He had made his way to the far aft, the point of the ship highest from the water.

As the ship continued to tilt downward, another row of lights slowly submerged into the darkness. There was an awful groaning of metal and the forward funnel fell with a *crash.* Then the lights flickered and went out. A collective gasp came from the people in the nearest lifeboats, followed by whispered prayers.

A cacophonous noise unlike anything Mairin had ever heard before emanated from the darkness, and she dove under the water. She watched in horror as the ship split in two. The broken bow of the *Titanic* slipped down, descending into the deep as if it was sailing there with purpose.

When she popped back up, she could barely make out the dark stern section of the ship which had temporarily righted itself as the water rushed unimpeded into the open ship. Suddenly, it, too, tipped. A chorus of screams pierced the night as, with a rush of finality, *Titanic* slipped into the water.

In the confusion, Mairin lost sight of Edwin. Had he gone under? She ducked into the water and saw the propellers disappear from view as the back half of the boat spun in its descent, spewing debris in all directions.

Zale pursued the falling ship, so if Edwin was trapped, he would find him. Meanwhile, Mairin floated on the water and searched Edwin's glow in the darkness. Deck chairs, barrels, and broken pieces of timber and other objects floated up to the surface. She swam underwater, dodging these objects as she continued her search. There. His glow in the black water shone as a beacon, and she shot up toward him.

He'd been knocked unconscious, but his life belt held him up.

Swimmers flailed around them as the still water churned.

An overturned boat looked promising, but as Mairin propelled Edwin toward it, several other men beat her to it, clamoring on top until it almost sank itself. "No more!" one man shouted. "We'll all go under."

Another man swam away, saying, "That is all right boys. Keep calm, and God bless you."

Mairin swam farther, looking in vain for another way to get Edwin out of the water. Meanwhile, behind her, those on the overturned boat began reciting in unison, "Our Father, who art in heaven…"

Then several finfolk arrived, stirring up the water.

“Zale?” Mairin’s voice rose in panic. She dove under the barrier to talk to him.

His pained expression reflected her own. “Get Edwin away from here, or it will get worse for all of us. The finfolk will keep attacking until no one is left alive. The water needs to be still or the boats will turn over. Go. The finmen will follow you. I’ll do what I can here.”

Mairin looked toward the surface with heartache. Passengers treaded water or swam, trying to find something to climb up on. Others were already motionless in the water, their life belts holding them afloat.

Zale was right. The finfolk would get to Edwin and then punish her by going after all the humans. If she took Edwin away, the finfolk would follow her. It was he they wanted most of all. “But what about you?” she asked Zale. What if the finfolk turned on him when he didn’t have his full strength?

“I’ll be fine. Go now and don’t look back.”

Mairin nodded. She shot to the surface and then looped her arm around Edwin’s torso to keep his face above water. She was fast, but was she fast enough? They were still miles and miles from land. Would he freeze to death by then or not?

“There they are!” A finman came up from below, Edwin’s glow a beacon guiding them.

Mairin needed to get him far ahead and fast. “Couldn’t the mermaids have tagged you a different way?” she said to the unconscious Edwin.

She’d gotten a head start that would have been enough if she was alone.

But here she was dragging a human male and having to keep his head above water so he could breathe. She had thought the task a small one, to keep a

human safe in the water. This was going to be harder than she could ever imagine.

“Just let him go, princess and we all win,” one of the finman said.

“Their lifespans are so short anyway. He won’t even notice.”

“We know you don’t really care about them,” taunted the other finman.

There was a thump as something collided with the finman closest to her.

“Go!” Zale yelled as he tumbled with the finman.

Thank you, Zale. That took one out, but Moab and the others were still after her.

Mairin swam hard and fast until she had lost all of them but Moab. He wasn’t able to catch her, but he wasn’t losing pace, either.

“If you don’t live up to your end of the bargain,” he called out, “you’re going to die as soon as the prince touches land. I told you the consequence was death.”

“You said death to the human, and that I’d have a chance to save him by making him fall in love with me instead.”

He laughed. “I said the consequence was death and then filled in the blank for you. You are the one changing our agreement. You’re ensuring the human lives, which means *you* die.”

Mairin raced ahead while she thought about what the finman said. His words were too slippery. She had a hard time grasping a hold of them. She glanced back and saw the finman had kept up with her, making her wonder if Zale’s strength was making him faster, too.

“Why death?”

“Princess, I’m breaking that barrier. I hoped to do so with you as an ally.

I can do so with you as an enemy. A dead enemy.”

He was talking in riddles and Mairin had no time to think. All she knew was that she needed to get Edwin to land. Whatever came after, so be it. She wouldn’t allow Edwin to die when she could save him.

She spotted a blue whale and positioned herself on the other side. The whales were friends of the mermaids but didn’t particularly care for finfolk.

It gave her a break from Moab’s taunting.

Swim, little mermaid, swim. The voice in the air encouraged her. *You’re almost there. I can see it now.*

“Who are you?” she said aloud. She listened for an answer above the splash of water as she struggled to stay ahead of Moab, trying to keep Edwin above-sea.

There was no answer.

Mairin followed the whale until it turned north, but she wouldn’t follow it into colder water. Edwin needed to warm up, now. She was racing against time.

CHAPTER 29

T *he finman can't touch the human while he is under your protection. Do not let go. Do not listen to his voice.*

Mairin had so many questions for this voice that kept talking to her but explaining nothing. Maybe Moab couldn't touch Edwin, but he could hurt her. The voice never said anything about that.

Moab laughed as he caught up again. "Why try to save him? He's already failing. Such a weight you are carrying. No one would blame you if you let go. No one would even know."

I've joined the daughters of the air. I never needed a human soul after all. Tell my sister I'm sorry, but I made the right choice. You have, too.

Mairin gasped. "You're the Little Mermaid?"

Mairin had so many questions for her aunt, but not now. She had to focus and get Edwin to land. She'd already failed at releasing her people. If Edwin died, she would have failed him and might doom her kingdom to enslavement by the finfolk.

"Who are you talking to?" Moab asked. "You are going insane with the pressure. Let him go, and you'll be free. We can each go back to our kingdoms and tell our people the good news."

Listen to me. The life the humans have is different from ours. They have their own salvation. We were the daughters of the sea, but now we are the

daughters of the air. You, too, can become one after you have lived your full life below-sea.

We live in the air, the sea mist. We watch. We help.

My sister, the queen, has kept her promise as I have kept mine. Stand fast, young mermaid. Do what is right.

The voice drifted away as Mairin got closer to the land. She found a protected bay where there was a small beach. Even the finman remained in the deep ocean as she navigated into the choppy bay. She could only drag Edwin so far up on the sand. He breathed, but his body tossed with the waves and threatened to go back out to sea. No other human was around to see him and help. It was still too dark.

She had to get him out of the water. There was no other way but to get her legs back. She scooted herself onto the beach and dried herself with the sand. Her arms bled, and she'd scraped off many of her beautiful royal scales on the rocks and sand. The pain ripped through her as the water evaporated off her tail and the transformation began. Would she die in human form? No, she couldn't.

With all the strength she had, she lugged and pulled and shoved and finally got him far enough up on the beach that the water couldn't take him.

"Please live," she whispered as she retreated into the shallow water to keep watch and await her death.

She would die alone. At least the Little Mermaid had her sister there with her in the end. *Oh, the queen, her mother.* She'd lost so much. First she gave up her beautiful hair to try to save her sister. Then to lose that youngest sister and now also her oldest child. Mairin feared for her mother.

How would she react?

Every muscle ached. She'd never pushed herself so hard. She'd always wanted to, to see how fast she could swim. Exhausted, she closed her eyes.

I'll just rest for a moment before I have to deal with Moab. She hoped that

she would be able to outswim him and reach home to see her family one last time, but she'd seen how powerful he was. There was no way.

She focused on the feel of rising and falling with the waves and thought back to the last time she was home. Racing Zale and her brother to the shipwreck. Miss Pearl's attack. The quest given to her from her mother. If only she could see her home again…

W

, Mairin opened her eyes and got her bearings. *Am I alive?*

How am I still alive? How long have I been resting?

Recent events all came rushing back. Where was Edwin? Had he died?

She lifted her head out of the water.

He was staring at her.

"You're awake," she said. She shrank back, trying to hide her tail, but she could tell by the way he looked at her that he was seeing her in a new light. She self-consciously touched the smattering of gold-rimmed scales that dotted her forehead.

"You're a mermaid."

She licked her lips, not saying anything. Should she deny it? The Little Mermaid never confirmed her identity. The merpeople way was to quietly beautify the ocean and remain a mystery to the human race. They were not to get involved. It caused problems every time.

He shifted. "At least now I know my great-grandfather was telling the truth about what he thought had happened to him."

Mairin looked out into the ocean, searching for any sign of Moab.

"You're safe, if that's what you're wondering. No one else is around.

That…other one stayed out in the water until he saw me open my eyes. He wanted me to tell you that when you're done here, you know where he'll be."

Mairin's thoughts were muddled. How would she know—or care—

where he'd be, as long as he wasn't near her? And how was she still alive if Edwin was too?

"How do I get you home?" she asked. She would keep on task. "We're at a beach in Newfoundland, as far as I can tell."

"You've done all you need to. I'll stay on this side of the world for now." He eyed her sideways. "And I suppose when I cross back again, if I get in trouble, there will be a mermaid there to help?"

Mairin shrugged.

"Why is my family so special?"

"Your great-grandfather was loved."

"What did he do?"

"Nothing. He just was…" Mairin didn't know how to explain it. The Little Mermaid loved him. She chose to die to save him.

Edwin nodded slightly and closed his eyes. Mairin realized he was still cold. Probably close to death. He needed to get somewhere warmer. The sky was not as dark now, so the sun would soon shine on him, but would it be enough? These were things she didn't know about people. He was so still. His voice so quiet.

"Maybe you could keep talking so I know you're okay."

He kept his eyes closed but smiled. "What happened to all those people?

In the ocean."

Mairin didn’t want to answer. Zale would do his best to get as many as he could out of the water, but without his strength… She didn’t want to think about it. And with no mermaids frequenting the waters there, Zale was on his own. She settled for the concrete answer. “We left so quickly I don’t know.” She shook her head sadly. “You humans don’t survive long in the water. Especially water below freezing.”

He swallowed. He knew. They both knew, and it was too terrible to think about. She’d seen the end of the process but had never *lived* it before.

The horror and sadness overwhelmed her.

What she didn’t say to Edwin was that she had needed to get him away or everyone would have been lost. The finman didn’t care about any human life. He saw them as expendable. Mairin didn’t want Edwin carrying the guilt of that. The conflict between her and the finman was not about him in particular. He just happened to be the one caught in the middle, unaware.

Sounds of people coming, fishermen maybe, broke into their conversation.

Edwin turned his head. “How am I going to explain this? A passenger from the sinking *Titanic* ends up a two-days’ sail away? If I tell them about you, they’ll think I’ve gone nutters like my great-grandfather.”

“I wouldn’t tell anyone you were on *Titanic*. There will be so much confusion, you can simply slip back into your life and refuse to talk about it.”

The voices got louder. Whoever was coming was around a rocky outcrop a short distance away.

Edwin mustered enough energy to take off his life belt. He lifted his hand toward her. “You should go.”

“Yes. Looks like you’ll live.” She slowly edged backward into deeper water. “I have to take care of something. Do you think you can stay away from the water for a while?”

There were no mermaids in the area to help him, but she couldn't stay.

She had to find out what was going on with Zale and her kingdom back home. As she thought about it, though, she realized what Moab's message meant. He had taken Zale and they would be at the shipwreck. It was the only way he could get her to come to him. She shuddered. The *Titanic* was the last place she wanted to go back to.

"Don't worry about me. I have no desire to go near the water for a long time." Edwin looked toward the voices as he brushed sand off his hands.

"Thank you. For saving me. Is there anything I can do for you?"

Mairin bit her lip. How could a human help her? A random thought popped into her head. "I'm afraid Cecily's confessions book has gone down with the ship. Can you send her another in my name?"

Edwin snorted. "Really? That's what concerns you most of all?" He chuckled.

Mairin chuckled with him at the absurdity of it all. From Edwin's perspective, he'd just been rescued from certain death. From her perspective, she'd just broken all the rules and would likely never surface again. In giving everything she had to free her people, she didn't change a thing. In fact, she may have made things worse.

"No," she said. "Cecily's book is not my greatest concern, but shopping for another isn't something I can do myself. I'd like to know that at least one loose end has been tied. If it wasn't for her, I wouldn't have learned all that I did. She helped give me an experience of a lifetime. Put a note in there from me. Say: You've been given a second chance. Live it well."

"Tell you what, let's meet at Kronborg Castle on the anniversary of today."

Mairin shook her head. "We're friends now, but later you might want a photograph of me in the water to prove I exist. Then we won't be friends anymore."

“I won’t.”

“I don’t want you to be tempted.”

He slowly nodded. “Fair enough. But I’ll still watch for you, the way my great-grandfather did.”

CHAPTER 30

A s Mairin swam away from the human, her thoughts returned to Moab. He'd lied about the consequences of her rescuing Edwin.

What else had he lied about?

He told Edwin that Mairin would know where he was, and there was only one place they both knew about. He had Zale captured somewhere on the sunken *Titanic.* She couldn't go there unprepared.

Mairin popped up above the surface and turned her face upward.

"Hello? Can you hear me? How does one find the sea witch?"

Mairin waited, listening to the seagulls play along the shore.

Yes, Mairin, I can hear you. The sea witch is confined to a floating island, with no control over where the currents take her. The winds are blowing it our way. You can meet it by following my voice.

Mairin swam north, following the Little Mermaid's voice. Never in her wildest dreams did Mairin imagine she would contact the sea witch, the one who had caused her family so much pain.

She is close. I'm leaving you now, Mairin.

"Not yet, please. I need you."

I've done all I can. I must go back to where I belong.

After swimming alone for a time, Mairin saw a giant squid below her.

Mairin approached it from the side to make sure it saw her. "I'm looking for

the sea witch," she said.

The squid rolled its eye and pointed its arms slightly north of where Mairin was going.

“Thank you.”

Not long afterward, two finman began trailing her. Were they loyal to Moab or the sea witch? She sped up, not exactly comfortable with either option, and lost them. Soon she saw a shimmer in the water and realized the floating island extended down into the sea as a giant kelp forest.

“Not any farther.” A finman swam out from the kelp forest and blocked Mairin’s path. Tall and thin, his arms crossed, he looked down his nose at her.

“I have business with the sea witch.” Her voice came out strong and clear.

The finfolk who had been following her caught up.

The guard jerked his head to the smallest one, who shot toward a crystal spire visible in the middle of the forest.

“You cannot enter our realm, but she’ll see you in there.” He nodded to a hole in the seaweed curtain not far away.

Mairin swam through, expecting a dark cave, but was surprised to find an open garden of sea plants that would rival Grandma Opal’s rock garden.

Light came from a circle of luminous algae suspended from the ceiling.

Mairin nervously circled the garden, going over what she would say to the sea witch. Be honest and lay everything out? Try to be coy and make the sea witch come to her own conclusions?

A shadow darkened the entrance and Mairin stopped still.

The sea witch parted the seaweed with a dramatic flair and entered the room. She was a large finwife, aged several decades older than her true age, as all finwives who remain in the water do. Unlike the thin finmen, the

finwives tended to be curvy, and the sea witch might be the curviest of them all. She filled the small garden, and Mairin self-consciously backed away.

Though the sea witch smiled, stretching her lips across bright teeth, she did not appear welcoming, rather curious, and with her eyes wide, somewhat eagerly opportunistic.

“You looked surprised, little mermaid.” Her scratchy voice immediately gave away the reason the sea witch had wanted to bargain with Mairin’s aunt for her voice. The sound grated.

Mairin tried to mask her expression. If she was to negotiate with the clever sea witch, she needed more control over her own thoughts. Mairin spread her arms to indicate the garden. “This isn’t the prison I expected for you.”

“I’m not in prison, exactly. Your grandfather limited my movements, more so than he has yours, apparently. I can’t go near your kingdom. But obviously, you can still wander into mine. You mermaid princesses are a plucky lot, aren’t you?”

Mairin didn’t know how to answer, so she remained silent.

“I tried to explain to your grandfather that it’s not my fault what happened. You little mermaids keep coming to me for help. First the little one comes asking for legs. Then her sisters come asking for a way to get her back. None of them succeed in their quest. Foolish mermaids. I shouldn’t be punished for your misdeeds, should I?”

“I’m not here for help with a *misdeed*, as you say.”

The sea witch arched an eyebrow. “You’re not? Why else would you need my help and not that of the merqueen?”

“My queen is too far away to help in this urgent matter, and I suspect you might have a personal interest in what I have to tell you.”

The sea witch sashayed closer and leaned in. “You smell like the air.”

Her eyes narrowed. “The merqueen sent you above-sea?”

“In a sense.”

“Ha, ha.” The sea witch clapped her hands in delight. “You failed at whatever meaningless task she sent you on and now you want me to clean it

up so she doesn’t find out. Is that it?”

There was no time to allow the sea witch to toy with her. “I’m here about Moab. He’s one of yours, isn’t he?”

The sea witch’s expression changed, like she’d just pricked herself on a sharp shell. She turned her back and began pruning a winged kelp. “What’s he done?”

Mairin laid out all that had gone on since meeting the finman near Southampton.

“You mean you met him at Southampton, not, er, farther east?” She turned slightly to see Mairin from the corner of her eye.

Mairin paused her account. “Did you send him to attack our kingdom?”

The sea witch went back to trimming the plant. “Carry on. What else happened?”

Realizing the sea witch was aware of the attacks, Mairin edged her way to the exit while she continued the tale. She had assumed Moab was acting on his own, but perhaps he wasn’t if the sea witch knew of the attacks on the mermaid kingdom.

The sea witch listened thoughtfully, nodding now and then to encourage Mairin to keep talking. “I knew I felt a ship going down. Off the coast of Newfoundland, wasn’t it?”

Mairin nodded. After she finished the story with leaving Edwin on the beach, the sea witch snapped the plant in two.

“Is that what that little cipher is up to? I wondered why he’d been so scarce lately.”

“I don’t know what he looked like the last time you saw him, but he’s not little. He’s got the strength of a triton.”

The sea witch turned and met Mairin’s gaze. “How did he do that?” She caressed her scarred throat as if there had once been a necklace there.

Mairin made a note and continued on. “He traded one of the junior triton guards for it.”

“A triton guard gave up his strength? I never thought I’d see the day.

Moab is more clever than I thought.” She chuckled.

“He’s dangerous,” Mairin said. “He wants to rule the ocean.”

In two strokes, the sea witch positioned herself between Mairin and the exit. “What do you need me for? The prince’s line remains—breathing on land, the way the Little Mermaid requested. Until her bargain ends, I cannot make another with your family.” She smiled widely. “Unless…you’d care to give up your voice in exchange? I could try to work something out. It should belong to me, anyway. The Little Mermaid had no right to trick me in the end. She and your grandfather and the daughters of the air.” The sea witch smiled a wicked grin. “At least I still have her tongue.”

She stuck out her arm from which dangled in an odd bracelet of small glass perfume bottles tied together with seaweed. Mairin flinched as she realized the bottles were filled with bits of flesh.

The sea witch laughed. “It was her grandmother she should have been angry at for giving her bad advice. Mermaids can’t become fully human.

You are what you are. What was she thinking?” Again, the sea witch’s hand went to her throat as if expecting something to be hanging there.

Mairin took a guess. “Moab stole your necklace, the one that lets you surface.”

The smile faded from the sea witch’s face. She swam around Mairin, opening up the path to the exit. “Maybe you have a point. We can’t let him

keep the triton’s strength, can we?”

“Agreed.” Mairin was relieved to have the sea witch on her side, if she could be trusted.

“I suppose the triton wants it back, but he’s in no condition to get it for himself?”

Mairin grimaced. It was her fault for putting him in this situation. She nodded.

“So, if I help you, what do I get in return?” The sea witch stopped in front of her, hands on hips.

“Oh. Well.” *What do I have to offer?* “You get control of your own people back. Moab means to take your place.” Mairin kept her chin up and gaze unwavering. She had struck a nerve with the necklace. “The ship that went down was a luxury ship. You can have it all if you tell me how to defeat Moab.”

“*Pwah.* Luxury ship. You mermaids are the ones who like things that sparkle. I prefer the cargo vessels. Raw materials. Now that, I can do something with.”

“It’s the largest ship they’ve ever built. I’m sure there is some cargo that would interest you.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” The sea witch sneered. “I never liked dealing with your grandfather. He was too concerned with keeping the peace in the sea. You remind me of him.”

“Does that mean you’ll do it? Give Zale back his strength?”

“I can’t do a thing here in my floating island. But I can tell you what to do. It’s both simple and impossible. Moab will keep his treasures near to his heart. You need to get close to him to break the bonds that tie this Zale down.”

“Speak plainly. How do I do that?”

“Now that would be too easy, wouldn’t it? How are you going to build character if I give you all the answers? I’d be a terrible teacher.” She touched the place where her necklace used to be.

“Thank you,” Mairin said. She knew what to do now.

“If I know Moab,” the sea witch continued, “he’ll reel you in with some bait.”

“Yes, that’s how he got me the first time. He figured out I wanted to go above-sea more than anything and knew how to twist the truth so I’d agree.”

The sea witch merely raised an eyebrow. “What does he have that you want now? What would cause you to risk everything again?”

Zale.

The sea witch laughed. “Your face is an open book, as the humans say.

Moab already has you, doesn’t he? Even now he is reeling you in. Better be careful little one. You nearly died once today. A second time might stick.”

CHAPTER 31

W ith great speed, Mairin retraced her path to the *Titanic.* Her muscles still ached, but the brief rest had done her good.

Knowing Edwin was safe took that responsibility off her mind so she could focus on what was happening in the sea.

As she neared the location where *Titanic* went down, the hum of another vessel steered her slightly off course. She swam up to the surface and broke through the waves near a floating barber's pole. The sun shone upon a new day, and in the distance, a ship was rescuing the last of the survivors. This ship was a great deal smaller than *Titanic*.

The weary souls saved from the disaster climbed a rope ladder up to the main deck. The last lifeboat bumping against the large hull looked small and vulnerable. While Mairin watched, a woman got into a canvas sling similar to what the finman used to haul her aboard the tender. Could that have only been a few days ago?

As she swam closer, she read the name *Carpathia* on the rescue ship, the last word she would read above-sea. This rescue, the last thing she would see above-sea. For surely her mother would take away the necklace as soon as she heard about what Mairin had done, and that would be the least of the consequences for her adventure.

Mairin's jaunt into the human world was ending as bitterly as the Little Mermaid's had. Perhaps her grandfather and the sea witch were right after all in forcing a season of separation for the seafolk. Sights like this were hard to watch.

A deck chair floated by, empty and half submerged. Mairin pictured a middle-aged woman wrapped in a blanket and sipping hot broth, unaware that in a few hours, her life would be in jeopardy.

It was all so sad. Why did humans continue to board ships when so many of them ended up at the bottom of the sea? Why risk their lives to go from one continent to another?

Satisfied there was nothing for her to do above-sea, Mairin took in her bearings, noting how far they had drifted away from where the *Titanic* went down. She lingered above the water, fixing in her mind the blue sky, the clouds, the cresting waves. When Miss Pearl awoke, Mairin would tell her all of it, to the tiniest detail.

Finally, Mairin returned to the watery world she knew. Her mermaid lungs drank in the salt water as she breathed, and her strength returned to her the deeper she swam. Her below-sea eyesight hadn't fully returned yet, and she strained to see clearly underwater. Above-sea light had been so bright that she was severely hindered down here.

Before long, *Titanic* loomed before her. The great ship had broken in two, and the front and back sections now lay maybe half a mile apart with several debris fields between and around them where items had fallen out and floated away.

The ship had settled in a barren part of the deep sea, with nothing but a plain seafloor for miles and miles. And the bow had plowed into the ocean floor almost up to the anchors which hung above D-deck, the deck where the first-class dining saloon was. As Mairin swam near the stern, she quickly realized Moab wouldn't be there. This part of the ship had been severely damaged on its descent. The decks had collapsed on themselves

and much of the contents thrown onto the seabed as if this section had been spiraling all the way down.

Mairin cautiously approached the shipwreck. There were no signs of life other than a curious cat shark skimming along the portholes in the middle decks. To swim inside the shipwreck would be dangerous, not only because of Moab, but because heavy items would still shift and settle for days.

Roofs could collapse without warning as the water pressure bore down on the human creation. Not to mention, there would be people inside who had

lost their lives, trapped as the vessel went down. She didn't want to see that.

Where would Moab wait for me?

The boat deck? The grand staircase? One of the restaurants?

Mairin continued down, her heart racing. She completed a slow circle around the front portion of the ship, looking for the best point of entry. She swam beside the boat deck, now cleared of its lifeboats, past the gymnasium, the first-class promenade, and over the third-class well deck…

all quite still and out of place here at the bottom of the sea.

The easiest point of entry might be in the severed sections where the ship had been torn in two. But as she got closer, she wasn't so sure. It looked like there would be plenty of space for her to slip in, but the edges were jagged and unwelcoming. The bow appeared smoother and easier to navigate.

The beautiful window above the grand staircase had been shattered when the water had poured in over top, but that seemed an obvious point of entry. Instead, she swam down the promenade on A-deck, thinking how only a few hours ago, she and Edwin had traversed this same path above-sea. A broken window gave her access to the grand staircase from below, and she went in, brushing the floating pieces of glass out of her way.

What she saw shocked her. The entire staircase was missing, leaving a gaping hole that descended deep down into the ship. Metal beams protruded

into the open space and one of the sweet cherubs holding a flame had gotten jammed sideways, caught in the twisted metal.

A thump sounded from inside the first-class lounge. She cautiously made her way there. The beautiful room was a mess. Chairs had been flung to one side. Beams had been smashed, and the roof collapsed in places. She swam farther in and found one of the bookshelves upright. The books remained lined up in rows as she had last seen them, though the glass doors had cracked.

“I knew you’d come back.” Moab swam out from an open door near the cloakroom.

Mairin jumped in surprise, and he laughed. He had returned to his finfolk form, long and narrow like the kelp in the sea witch’s floating island, and carried a chain filled with pocket watches he’d collected. She assumed he was trying to find Zale’s pocket watch, so he’d have another way to surface.

“You have someone I want,” she said, keeping her gaze on his cruel eyes instead of lowering them to the shell attached to his necklace. She hoped Zale was nearby. The cloakroom would be a good place to confine someone.

“The heart is a fickle thing, princess. Are you sure he wants you? He might be glad to be rid of you.”

Every nerve inside Mairin told her to swim away, but he had Zale somewhere, and she needed to break that shell so Zale could get his strength back.

“What is it you want?” she asked, playing innocent. “I couldn’t make the human fall in love, but there might be something else I can do to help our cause.” She inched forward, lacing her next words with the siren’s voice as she spoke loudly. “I can help you. We want the same thing.”

Moab flinched in disgust. “No, princess. Your siren voice has no effect on me. I have a finwife, an old hag whose voice grates on me daily. I can’t

be swayed.”

His gaze lowered—for just a moment—to *her* pearl necklace. *That’s what else he wants. My aunt’s necklace.*

Hoping Zale heard her, she dropped the affected siren tones. “You can’t deny that we both want the same thing for our people. To surface like we once did. To feel the sun on our faces, to watch the birds, to witness the stars at night.”

Moab stared back, then a smirk broke across his face. “Seems I overestimated you. Somehow, I had the impression you and I were more alike. I thought you were smarter than the Little Mermaid. I thought you hated the shackles placed on us. I thought your dreams were bigger and that you and I could rule the sea.”

“I don’t know what’s bigger than having access to the entire world. To be fully mermaid, breathing both air and water.” She hated how he mocked her dream, but she had to keep him talking while she came closer.

“Yes, I suppose, to you, that is as big a dream as you can imagine. But to a finman like me, having access to the world means to dominate it. We are a shape-shifter race, not hindered by the water like you are. We are meant to swim below and walk on land. Without my help, you would never have gotten legs to leave the water behind.”

She had one chance. If she made a grab for the necklace and missed, then he’d know what she was after. He might already suspect she’d figured out what she needed from him. “Then why did you want me to come back here? Why keep Zale captive other than for spite?”

“I like spite. Makes me feel grand. For a time. The feeling wears off and then I need to do something else to excite me.”

The necklace glimmered in the dim light, and Mairin took great pains not to look at it. She couldn’t let Moab guess that she knew any of his secrets. She had to get close enough to him to take the necklace and smash it.

Mairin thought of all the lives lost. Moab had no regard for them. All he cared about was having his way. In her short time above-sea, Mairin had witnessed both great love and sacrifice along with pervasive vanity and selfishness. She wanted no part in helping Moab. If it meant that she had to remain undersea until her dying day, that was better than sacrificing others for her dream. Future generations would be released to breathe air again.

Close enough now. Quick as an octopus attack, she darted her hand out and gave the necklace a sharp tug.

The cord around his neck didn’t break.

He crossed his arms, not afraid in the least. “Again, you disappoint me, princess. Did you think it would be that easy?”

Mairin stared at the shell in her hand. This was not how Zale’s rescue had played out in her mind. She could tug on it again, but the finman would only mock her more. It was then she noticed a piece of broken glass glitter as it floated by. She grabbed it, and with one motion sliced the necklace from Moab’s neck. They shared a shocked glance at each other before she darted away, necklace in hand and pulse racing.

She needed to find something to break the shell open and fast. Moab was on her tail, so there could be no mistake. It had to shatter with the first blow.

CHAPTER 32

O *h dear, oh dear. I need something hard. Metal or rock would be best.*

Moab chased Mairin around the lounge until she escaped into the reception room where the grand staircase used to be. Her gaze went to the bronze cherub twisted in the debris, his little arm holding a flame that, had there been electricity, would have cast a warm light. With all her speed and strength, she smashed the shell against the statue. There was a blinding light and then vapors of various colors zipped through the water, searching out cracks in the ship. Was that it, then? Had she given Zale back his strength?

When she could see again, she found Moab in front of her, the cherub ripped off its stand and in Moab's raised hand.

Moab turned his evil gaze on her. "You," he said with a curl of his lip.

Mairin reacted without thinking. She darted up through the domed roof as if escaping from a shark. She swam along the length of the ship, and the cherub clipped her hip as it hurtled by, landing in the debris field. But Moab didn't follow her. When she looked back, she realized he'd retreated inside.

Zale.

Immediately she swam back to the lounge. The finman sorted through the debris near the cloakroom. He was no longer alone. Several other

finmen had arrived to push against the door to keep Zale from getting out.

Another swam in behind her to block the exit back to the grand staircase.

Moab, meanwhile, picked up a broken pipe and tested the edge for sharpness.

Zale must not be at full strength yet. She needed to distract Moab long enough for Zale to recover. But he paid her no attention, not thinking she was a threat.

Her hand reached for her pearl necklace. It was the merpeople's last object that let them surface through the barrier. Moab wanted it, but if she gave it to him, she could never surface again. "For Zale," she whispered as she swam forward.

"Moab! You want my necklace? You can have it." She yanked it from her neck and gave it a good shake. The pearls floated in different directions, and she shook up the water with her tail to disperse them faster.

That got his attention. He dropped the pipe to snatch up the pearls.

While Moab chased down the pearls, Mairin took the one hidden in her hand and popped it into her mouth. She swallowed. She was fully committed now. If one pearl was missing, it would be useless to Moab. And if he wanted it, he'd have to kill her to get it.

She turned and swam away. But because the stairwell entry was blocked by a finman, she darted through a corridor the staff used, through a hole in the pantry's floor. Her first instinct was to hide, but Nahla had shown her that her strength was in swimming. She needed to get to open water.

Trouble was, there was no clear path. She'd go one direction only to come up against piles of tables that had shifted in the descent, or broken floors that cut off her escape. Any hint of a shoe or a piece of clothing sticking out, and she turned away. This once lovely ship was no longer lovely. It held no more allure for her.

At last, she found another broken window to the outside, but as she surged out of the ship, she came face to face with two finmen who blocked

her way to the open ocean. At their call, more swam her way. Mairin darted right and swam toward the stern of the ship. She'd have to lose them inside since she was smaller and could fit where they couldn't go. She squeezed into a narrow gap, slicing her arm open on a piece of the twisted metal. Her blood clouded the water, and she put pressure on the cut to stop the bleeding.

Carefully, she swam down the corridor, finding herself in familiar territory. She was on her former C-deck. Mairin glanced back to make sure the finmen weren't following her before she ducked into Cecily's old room.

She found the bed covering twisted around a broken pipe and wrapped herself up to disguise herself in case they managed to squeeze in through the opening and searched room by room. Once they'd passed by, she would swim out the opposite direction and look for Zale. He should have his strength back by now, and the two of them could go home.

The room had been torn apart during the sinking. The ceiling pipes jutted down, and the floor was pierced with pieces of wood and metal poking up. Cecily's belongings lay scattered or buried in debris.

Mairin played back her time in this room. Of bubbly Cecily, so eager to leave her world of glamour behind and go join her beloved on land. Of Miss Higgins, who so willingly took Mairin in and served her as she would have done Cecily. She stared out the porthole where she'd spent many an hour contemplating her life both below-and above-sea and where she'd realized how much Zale meant to her.

"I don't need great strength to lock a little mermaid in a box." Moab slammed the door shut.

Mairin sat up and realized she'd likely left a trail of blood in the water from her arm. She flung off the bed covering and immediately tried to open the door, but Moab had jammed it.

She swam to the porthole, but it, too, refused to open.

The room was sealed tight. By the time the water and bacteria ate at the walls enough to create an opening, she would starve to death. This pretty room where she'd learned about who she was and what mattered most to her was now more confining than anything she'd felt in her small grotto at the back of the undersea palace.

Mairin searched the room for something she could use to make her own hole. If she could break into the next room, she might escape. He had her

pearls and wouldn't know one was missing, yet. She didn't know what else he wanted from her. What else was there for him to bargain with?

Ultimately, he wanted control of the ocean. Control of their kingdom. *Oh, no.* He could use her to get to the queen. Mairin couldn't let her mother be forced to choose between her daughter and her kingdom.

She tried to dislodge one of the pipes hanging down, but as she pulled, the entire ceiling buckled, and she was afraid it would completely cave in on her.

Cecily had a letter opener shaped like a knife. If it was still in the room, she might cut her way through to the next room. She gingerly lifted broken pieces of the wardrobe, searching for Cecily's stationery box. The corner of a photograph stuck out from a mass of debris. Mairin tugged it out. Edwin had snapped this picture of her standing at the rail. She had to bring this home with her, a memory of the unbelievable. It would remind her of what the waves looked like above-sea.

After searching for a purse, a belt, something useful, Mairin tore the bed covering and twisted it into a pouch to tie around her waist. She tucked the photograph inside, as well as a book she'd found. Then she continued her search for a way out. She had to reach home before Moab to stop her mother from making a terrible bargain.

A face popped up behind the porthole, trying to see in. Mairin startled, but then she realized what a beautiful face it was who stared back at her.

"Zale! I'm in here!" Mairin swam to the porthole and touched the glass.

Zale nodded, waved his hands for her to back away.

She backed against the cabin door and the next thing she heard was a terrific wrenching sound and the outer wall shifted. She watched as Zale tore off a piece of the ship's wall to get to her. He flung it aside, and she darted through the opening, landing in his arms.

"Oof," he said, laughing.

“I’m so glad you’re back. All of you,” she said, squeezing his neck will all her strength.

“Anything for you, Mairs.” He pulled back and kissed her forehead.

Suddenly shy, she shifted the conversation. “Where’s Moab?” she asked. They separated as she scanned the ship, looking for any lurking shadows.

“Last I saw, he and the others were headed north. Probably to the sea witch.” He looked grim. “At first, they were going toward our kingdom, but when I got my strength, I went after them.” He flexed his fingers. “Moab may have adjusted course, but we ought to get back and prepare everyone.

The sea witch will not be happy he failed.”

Mairin smiled. “I have a feeling she’ll be ready for him.”

“What do you know that I don’t?”

“I’ll tell you everything on the way home.” She looked at the devastation, the shadow of the glorious *Titanic,* and shuddered at the thought of those who had died. She would never forget what she had witnessed.

“You’d better not be blaming yourself for this,” Zale said.

“Don’t tell me this disaster would have happened without me. I was there. These people were happily on their way to New York. They were tucked into their beds or staying up late with friends. They weren’t prepared

__”

Zale shook his head and interrupted. “Moab was determined to get at Edwin. He would have sunk the ship whether you were here or not.”

“Maybe.”

“Not maybe. Look, Mairin, I know you feel pressure to be perfect, but you can’t fix everything that goes wrong. You are not responsible for everyone.”

“I know I’m not responsible for everyone. The queen is. And one day I’ll be the queen. And you’re a triton. You should never have given up your strength.”

“It was the only way I could protect you, Mairs. I’d do it again.”

“No, you won’t. I’ll never put you in that position again.”

“Yes, you will.” He laughed.

“Zale! How can you say that after what we’ve just been through? Don’t you think I’ll be wiser the next time?”

“I know you will. But I also know you don’t have to be someone you’re not with me. I’ve known you my entire life. I know who you are.”

He looked so earnest that her heart ached. How could he know her and still love her? After what she had just done. Because of her, he’d given up his strength. It might not bother him now, but it might in the future. She couldn’t remind him of that, now. So, instead, she said, “How can you know who I am when I don’t always know?”

He caressed her hand. “You’re growing into your role as future queen.

That can’t be easy. You will have to take risks and make decisions that affect all of us. Not every decision you make will be the right one. As long as you recognize that and are humble enough to reverse course, you’ll make a good queen. One whom the merpeople will love as much as I do.” He kissed her fingertips.

Mairin’s voice caught in her throat. She had come so close to ruining everything. She’d misunderstood the Little Mermaid’s legacy. Looking into Zale’s eyes, she wished they could stay there talking about whom they loved, but they couldn’t. Not yet. They had to make sure the kingdom was secure.

“Let’s go home,” she said. “We have to warn them in case Moab retaliates.”

CHAPTER 33

T here was little talking as they raced home. Mairin tried to think of how to explain everything to the queen, and Zale said he was going over the best way to tell Mairin's father that he'd lost his pocket watch.

They both stayed alert, looking for any finfolk who were out to cause trouble, but all appeared calm. At the entrance to their kingdom, they paused. It was late and the nightly singing would have already ended and the merpeople would be retiring to their individual grottoes.

"This is it, then," Zale said. He lifted a hand to greet the guard stationed out front. "All well?"

The guard looked startled, but quickly recovered. "Report to the palace for further instructions."

They swam through the tunnel, and Mairin said, "Are all your orders that concise? I assume if we were under attack, he wouldn't have allowed us through?"

"That is correct."

Already Zale had started acting like a stiff triton, and Mairin wondered if their newly won feelings would end once they were home. She swam in and headed straight for the palace. She ignored the gasps and the whispers as she swam through the palace gardens, now blooming with tiny white

flowers. It was odd that the merpeople gathered this late, but they seemed to be there for the unusual night blooming.

When she entered the throne room where her family met together, they all stared at her, stunned. Her mother's crown was off her head, placed on a nearby shelf, and she looked like she'd aged a year in the time Mairin had been gone. She mouthed Mairin's name.

Sapphire broke away from her sisters and approached her first. Before Mairin could speak, Sapphire accused her. “What happened to the human?”

“Hello, Aunt Sapphire. He’s safe on the other side of the ocean, and he promised not to go near the sea.”

A murmur broke out, and the queen raised her hand for silence.

“You spoke to him?” Aunt Sapphire’s eyes were wide.

Mairin glanced at Zale. If the tension wasn’t so strong in the room, she would have laughed. If they thought speaking to Edwin was shocking, wait until they heard the rest.

“I’ll explain everything if you give me a chance. And then I can return with you to show you where he is.”

Sapphire looked like she was about to refuse when a nod from the queen made Sapphire change her mind. “That is acceptable.”

Mairin was so surprised at her mother’s support that she almost stumbled over her next words. “But first,” Mairin said, “tell me if our kingdom is safe. Did the finfolk continue their attack?”

The queen came forward, her normally stern expression breaking in relief as she studied Mairin, noting the wound on her arm.

“They attacked, but the triton guard held them off. Or so we thought.

Then we realized all they were doing was keeping us within our boundaries.” The queen reached out and stroked Mairin’s cheek. “I was worried that I’d made a mistake sending you out and bringing Sapphire home.”

“I’m sorry I failed going above-sea. I thought I was better than the Little Mermaid, and I was wrong to hate the people who had nothing to do with our confinement undersea.” Mairin filled them in on what had happened with Moab.

“The things I saw. What those people did when they realized the ship was going down. The sacrifices they made…” She closed her eyes, expecting to feel tears. A funny notion to think in the depths of the sea. “I’ll never forget them.”

The room remained oddly quiet. Mairin looked at Zale to see his reaction, and he nodded in encouragement.

Her mother reached out and cupped Mairin’s face. “Perhaps you could compose a song to preserve the memories of the Little Mermaid and the people on the *Titanic.*”

“I would like that.” Something to honor those who gave their lives for the others. “And Miss Pearl?” Mairin asked, her stomach still tied up in a knot. “Is she awake?”

“Miss Pearl is fine,” Nahla said. “She’s probably in her garden, but when she finds out you’ve returned, she’ll make her way here. She woke up the day after you left. A little confused, a little angry that the finfolk had snuck up on her, but very much herself again.”

The knot in Mairin’s stomach finally unwound. She was home with the merpeople she loved so much. She just wished her mother would say something. When the queen didn’t react, Aunt Em nudged her.

The queen cast an annoyed look at her younger sister before she spoke.

“You learned a lesson that will stay with you for the rest of your life and help you be a wise ruler.” She twisted her lips. “And I was wrong to keep our family secret hidden from you. I was so afraid you would make wrong choices that I didn’t give you enough information to make the right choice.”

Mairin responded with a small smile, no longer feeling the need to score a point, even though now would be a good time, since her mother was so

contrite. “I might have done the same things anyway. The temptation to go above-sea and into their world was too great.”

Nahla turned away to hide a smile, but Mairin saw and was reminded she had an ally.

The queen returned to her throne. “We can’t go back and undo our actions. That’s one lesson that I learned when my youngest sister refused to take the knife and save her own life. We have to move forward and make amends where we can.”

“Are you going to tell her, or am I going to have to?” Nahla crossed her arms.

“Have you noticed the moss roses are blooming?” Aunt Em said with an eager smile.

There was a row of moss roses in the alcove near the thrones and they, too, were bursting with small white flowers dotted with yellow centers.

“Yes, I noticed the garden on my way in. Grandma Opal told me they would. She said to have faith.”

The queen plucked a cluster of the moss roses and waved Mairin forward. She tucked them behind Mairin’s ear. “Yes, they’ve been blooming since earlier today. That’s when I worried that you…that something had changed. They were the sign we’ve all been waiting for.”

There was a small disturbance as Mairin’s father and brother rushed into the room. Seeing Mairin and Zale were well, they resumed positions on either side of the door to wait until the queen finished.

“I don’t understand,” Mairin said. “I only managed to undo what I had done wrong in the first place. Their world caught me by surprise, as did the people. And from now on, I will be content undersea. Or, at least, I will honestly try this time.”

The queen and Emerald exchanged a glance.

“What?” Mairin asked, her stomach sinking. “Is there something else I don’t know about?”

They both nodded, but Aunt Em was smiling. “Our father and the sea witch came to an agreement, as you know, and he created the barrier, only to be breached when—”

The queen waved her hand, interrupting Em. “I’ll tell her.”

Aunt Emerald swam back to her sisters, and the queen continued.

“They included a provision in their agreement, that if one of our family was to trade their life to save another life, the barrier around our kingdom would turn to sea foam and allow us to surface. I knew about the provision, but I thought it would be me who would be called to make a sacrifice one day.” She gently touched the cut on Mairin’s arm that would turn to scar. A forever reminder of her mistakes and redemption.

“But I’m alive. I didn’t trade my life.”

“Yes. And the human is alive. But as you’ve explained, because of what Moab told you, you thought you were going to die, and you saved Edwin anyway. In addition, by breaking the pearl necklace you gave up your greatest dream in order to save Zale.”

“Moab lied to me. He knew parts of the agreement, but mixed things up to suit himself.”

“A lie is easier to believe when there is truth added to it.”

What her mother said started to sink in. “You mean the barrier has dissolved? You’ll allow us to go above-sea?”

With a smile playing at her lips, the queen nodded once before signaling toward the door. “Come in.”

Miss Pearl swam in and then gave Mairin a hug. “I was listening at the door but didn’t want to interrupt.” She laughed. “You really swallowed a pearl?”

Mairin laughed with her, happy to see Miss Pearl looking well, the bright pink back in her tail. “Yes, I didn’t know what else to do. I didn’t want him to have the necklace. And here, I brought you something.” Mairin

pulled out the book and the photograph. “The book is for your collection. I don’t think you have it.”

“*Pilgrim’s Progress.* I shall read it with great care. Thank you.”

“And this is my souvenir from above.” She showed Pearl the photograph.

Miss Pearl held it like a precious treasure. “Not what I ever thought I’d see.” She looked up from the photograph and whispered. “Do you still have the ability to…you know, walk?”

“I doubt it. Not after I destroyed the finman’s shell. Whatever abilities he gave us were probably released. I suppose Zale and I will have to try one day. Maybe a long time from now, when mother isn’t monitoring our surfacing so much.”

“Who, me?” the queen said.

Her mother actually told a joke. Mairin smiled. She looked over to catch Zale’s eye, but he was talking to her father and wouldn’t dare look her way.

The queen rose from the throne and picked up her crown from the coral shelf. “You’ll have to finish this conversation later. Right now, it’s time to tell the kingdom what has happened. It’s time for the young to surface.”

N

. “Mairin, is it true? Did you really grow legs?”

“I even have a photograph to prove it. Oh, wait till you see the world above the waves, Neme. It’s better than Miss Pearl told us. Better than we imagined, and now we’re free to enjoy it.”

Zale broke away from Kai and joined Mairin at the tunnel out of the kingdom, edging out Neme.

“Excuse me, Neme.” He swam protectively beside Mairin.

Neme raised her eyebrows and opened her mouth to speak, but Mairin cut her off with a shake of her head. She’d tell Neme all about it later.

Zale leaned closer. “Those flowers look pretty in your hair.”

Mairin smiled. “Thank you. What did my father say?” Together, they swam out ahead to lead their peers, all the merpeople who had never surfaced, up to see the stars.

“Given that the barrier is down, he wasn’t upset about the loss of the watch. Although, if you ever find one, bring it home for me, would you?”

Everyone was cautious as they approached the level where the barrier used to be, but when they passed through without incident, they shot up to join Mairin and Zale above-sea. It was quite a sight to witness, all these curious merpeople surfacing for the first time.

“Stars look like a sprinkling of white sand across a black sky,” Neme said. “Amazing.”

Kai surfaced beside Mairin. “Glad you’re home, sis.”

“Me, too.”

“And I’m even willing to overlook the fact that you and Zale had an adventure without me.”

Zale, who was floating on his back nearby, said, “I’m sorry to tell you, Kai, but Mairin and I will be having more adventures without you. Right,

Mairs?” He pulled her into his arms, and under the twinkling stars, bent his head toward her. “At least I hope so.” His gaze lowered to her lips.

She nodded, and he kissed her right there in front of everyone.

They separated, grinning, until out of the corner of her eye, Mairin noticed Kai up to mischief. She swam away as Kai pushed the water along the surface and splashed Zale in the face. Zale retaliated and soon there was a water fight going on.

Before long, they broke into a sea shanty learned from the fishermen in New Zealand.

There once was a ship that put to sea

The name of the ship was the Billy of Tea

The winds blew up, her bow dipped down O blow, my bully boys, blow

Mairin laughed and ducked undersea to talk to her mother, who refused to surface.

“May I go to the castle?” she asked. “There’s something I have to do.”

The queen, with her glittering crown resting on her close-cropped hair, nodded. “Just you and make it quick. We’ll meet you back at the kingdom.”

Eagerly, Mairin slipped away from the group, following the coastline to the bay where the turrets stood tall, the lights in the windows reminding her of the lights on the *Titanic* when viewed from the water. Edwin would not be here, yet. He may not ever cross the great ocean again, although since he knew he would be protected, maybe he would. No, Mairin wasn’t hoping to see Edwin.

As it was night, no one strolled along the beach, and the boats were all too far away for anyone to notice a shadow in the water.

“Are you here?” she called. “Can you talk to me when it’s not an emergency?” She spun around, listening. “I understand why you did what

you did now, when you were my age. I don’t hold it against you the way I once did. I’m sorry I judged you—and the humans—so harshly. We’re more alike than I thought.”

A warm gust blew across Mairin’s face and she continued. “Your sisters are well. Mother won’t surface, but I’m sure you already know that. And since you can’t return to the water, I wanted to thank you for your help.”

A lone seagull cried near the ships, but no voice sounded on the wind.

Mairin stayed out of the water as long as she dared, imagining what this scene looked like all those years ago. Generations had passed for these people, but for the merpeople it had only been a short amount of time.

While she waited, she thought of the song she would write. One that spoke of the mysteries of life below-sea and the mysteries of life above-sea.

There would have to be made mention of the soul, of great love, of sacrifice…

What is it you want, little mermaid?

Mairin’s heart leaped at the voice. She suspected her aunt already knew the answer. “The same thing you did. I want what the people have. I want to live forever.”

We have a different path than the humans, but you can become one of us, a daughter of the air.

“Yes, that is what I want.”

Someone will come for you when the time is right.

“I’ll be ready. Thank you.”

Her heart content, Mairin dove under the sea and swam home, singing the human song as she went.

“When peace, like a river, attendeth my way, When sorrows like sea billows roll;

Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say,

It is well, it is well, with my soul.”

She found Zale waiting for her outside the tunnel. “Did you get the answer you were looking for?”

She smiled and reached for his hand. “I did.”

D

R

,

Not quite ready to say goodbye to Mairin and Zale? (Me either!) I’ve got a link to a bonus epilogue for you on my website. Here, you’ll also find videos and links for more information about *Titanic.*

ShonnaSlayton.com/Mermaid-Epilogue

I

,

this story, please consider leaving an online review to help other readers decide if they would like to read it, too.

AUTHOR NOTE

The amount of research material available for studying the Titanic is overwhelming, sometimes contradictory, and often only partial. Rumors and

myths abound, as does meticulously documented information and speculation.

I've portrayed life on board *Titanic* as close to true history as I was able to research. However, the main characters are all fictional. The passengers with famous names are mentioned fictionally in how they interact with Mairin, but sometimes they speak words quoted from documented testimony or interviews.

Here are some facts of interest:

Miss Higgins is modeled after real-life stewardess Miss Evelyn Marsden and Miss Annie Foster is modeled after missionary Miss Annie Funk, who I also quote. These women were not public figures, so I chose to create characters based on them instead of using their names.

I choose the location of the stateroom because it was one of the empty rooms on board. Also, because it is the part of the hull known as the "big piece" that has been brought up from the sea and is currently on display in Las Vegas. So, when you see the big piece, you can think of Mairin and her adventures in the room behind that porthole.

While I surrounded Mairin's story with touch points from history, I did allow for a few minor inaccuracies to remain through my fact-checks. One is that Mr. Meyer signed Mrs. Duff Gordon's confession book after dinner on Sunday night, but when Mairin signs it on Thursday, his comments are already there. There was a print shop for printing menus, but there is conflicting information regarding a darkroom for developing photos. Some say it was in the early plans and in early newspaper reports but was never actually built.

Similarly, I chose to reflect the more dramatic accounting of missionary Miss Annie Funk during the sinking. One source says she was already in the lifeboat and got out. Another says she was in line or about to step in and got pushed aside. Either way, her friends reportedly said "that would be just like Annie" to give up her seat.

The original *Little Mermaid* story springs from the concepts of the soul and eternity, so my thoughts were always on how to incorporate those themes with life on board *Titanic*. I especially found it interesting how on the day of the disaster, the church services centered on the Biblical text regarding salvation (coming the Sunday after Easter) and the hymn sing included songs about disasters at sea. We know some of the songs they sang that night, but note that 'It is Well with My Soul' is not one of the confirmed titles. However, if you go on to read more of the lyrics in the hymns they sang, you'll see real-life foreshadowing at its finest. It was as if those who attended the services were being prepared for what was to come.

Regarding the prince… One of the tricky things about combining history and fairy tale is walking the line between real life and fantasy.

Given that Hans Christian Andersen, the author of *The Little Mermaid*, was Danish, I set the "original" little mermaid story in Denmark. In my retelling, the date would have been in 1812 when King Frederick VI was on the throne. Since the family history is known, I sidestepped the "prince"

idea so as to not mix fairy tale with real-world lineage.

Folklore surrounding finmen and finwives is scant, so I may have invented some traits along the way.

A final note of interest. Much of *The Little Mermaid's Voice* was written during the 2020/2021 pandemic. Normally I don't mark world events that occur while I'm writing, but the historian in me thought it fun to include a snippet of 'The Wellerman' sea shanty dating from 1860 that in early 2021

turned into a worldwide sing-along (thank you Nathan Evans).

If something in this novel has made you curious, I urge you to look it up. Here are some of the resources I found to be especially helpful: The articles and discussion boards on Encyclopedia Titanica:

https://www.encyclopedia-titanica.org

Gilded Lives, Fatal Voyage by Hugh Brewster *Voyagers of the Titanic* by Richard Davenport Hines *A Night to Remember* by Walter Loyd

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For several years now, I've thought about and researched the passengers and crew of the *Titanic.* What unique and interesting lives they led, and what a scary and tragic disaster they endured. I hope I was able to tell a mermaid story with sensitivity to the tragedy the passengers experienced. I owe a great deal to the historians and scientists who have spent so much of their time and resources documenting all things *Titanic*.

The Little Mermaid's Voice would not be the story it is without the genius of author Abigail Johnson. She and I were chatting on the way home from a book signing, and when I mentioned I was researching shipwrecks for a *Little Mermaid* story, she piped up, "Why not *Titanic*?" Why not indeed? Thank you, Abigail, for challenging me to tackle the most famous shipwreck of all time. I don't think I'd have had the courage to try it without your prompting.

Huge thanks also to my critique partners and author friends who keep me going, who point out plot holes and typos, and who don't mind when I send an email with the subject line: Do you have time for a read? K.A.

Bledsoe, Sarah Chanis, Andrea Huelsenbeck, M. Huffman, Abigail Johnson, Kassie Lamoreaux, Amy K. Nichols, and Rebekah Slayton.

Also, thank you John Truby for pushing me to think harder about theme.

Your class and feedback still have me thinking.

Lisa Knapp, thank you for all your grammar finesse. Any remaining errors are my own.

Jenny Zemanek, thank you for covering this series so perfectly. You have a unique ability to capture the essence of a story with just a few well-selected illustrations.

Thanks to my husband and kids for suffering through my *Titanic* obsession. The piles of books. The visits to exhibits. The documentaries.

The deck plans display board…

Studying *The Little Mermaid* story reminded me what a precious thing it is to have a soul that will live forever. And studying *Titanic* (during a worldwide pandemic) reminded me how fragile our human bodies are. I'm thankful to the Lord for these timely reminders and for the joy that comes alongside living a creative life.

Finally, a big thank you goes out to the readers of the *Fairy-tale Inheritance Series.* Your reviews, your emails, and your enthusiastic feedback are gold to me.

ALSO BY SHONNA SLAYTON

Which one will you read next?

Fairy-tale Inheritance Series

Cinderella's Dress

Cinderella's Shoes

Cinderella's Legacy (novella)

Snow White's Mirror

Beauty's Rose

Sleeping Beauty's Spindle

The Little Mermaid's Voice

Lost Fairy Tales

The Tower Princess

Historical Women

Liz and Nellie: Nellie Bly and Elizabeth Bisland's Race Around the World in Eighty Days

Lessons From Grimm

Lessons From Grimm: How to Write a Fairy Tale (Writer's Guide)

Lessons From Grimm: How to Write a Fairy Tale Workbooks Series

Writing Prompts From Grimm (grades 3-6 and 7-12)

Document Outline

- Title Page
- Copyright
- Also by Shonna Slayton
- Contents
- Dedication
- Foreword
- Prologue
- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Chapter 5
- Chapter 6
- Chapter 7
- Chapter 8
- Chapter 9
- Chapter 10
- Chapter 11
- Chapter 12
- Chapter 13
- Chapter 14
- Chapter 15
- Chapter 16
- Chapter 17
- Chapter 18
- Chapter 19
- Chapter 20
- Chapter 21
- Chapter 22
- Chapter 23
- Chapter 24
- Chapter 25
- Chapter 26

- Chapter 27
- Chapter 28
- Chapter 29
- Chapter 30
- Chapter 31
- Chapter 32
- Chapter 33
- Author Note
- Acknowledgments
- Also by Shonna Slayton